



C L A S S R O O M   O F  
T H E   E L I T E

A L T E R  
SELF-TEST









# **Classroom of the Elite: Alter - Self-Test**

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# Vol. 1: Chapter 1.1 - A White Room Student

*Warning: This Fan Fiction Novel of Youzitsu may contain spoilers from the Light Novel. If you're an LN reader, you can think of this as a standalone alternate timeline with canon characters and elements. If you're anime-only, read at your own risk.*

I was thinking of how I should go about establishing myself as a fresh high school student. As ideas come into my mind, the bobbling and shaking bus occasionally interrupts my train of thought.

I got slightly nervous about how the passengers of the bus became increasingly crowded with students wearing the same uniform as I am. Before I could go back into fantasizing about how I should introduce myself in class...

"Excuse me, but shouldn't you offer up your seat?"

A young, well-built blond man, that goes to the same high school as I am, was sitting down on one of the priority seats. A woman dressed like an office lady was the source of that voice. Beside her was an elderly woman who had been standing for a while now.

"That's a really crazy question, lady. Why should I offer up my seat? There's no reason for me to do so." His eyes remained closed and his smile, unwavering.

"You're sitting in a priority seat. It's natural to offer those up to the elderly," she replied.

"I'm a healthy young person who certainly wouldn't find standing inconvenient. However, I'd obviously expend more energy by doing so than I would be by sitting. I have no intention of doing such a pointless thing. Or are you suggesting that I should act livelier, I wonder?" Looking at the office lady with a single eye, the man rebutted.

"Is that supposed to be the attitude to take while talking with your superiors?" reproached the lady.

While the two of them engaged in something that I would call a



pointless argument, I kept to myself for a brief second. I carefully thought about what I wanted to do after enrolling in this school. From Matsuo's kind intentions, it was clear that he wanted me to live a normal high school life. After all, *"that man"* took my entire childhood away from me.

At first, the obvious answer was to live in obscurity where I'm free from trouble. I dislike trouble anyway, so it was a natural first choice.

However, this school seems like it's way more than it is at first glance. Therefore, I changed my mind. Matsuo granted me a chance to take part in this so-called *"high school life"*. I'll at least test the abilities I got from the White Room and see how far I can go-- of course, with the intention of trying to enjoy myself to the fullest.

With that in mind, I ground through the things that the White Room lacked and studied them to the fullest-- and that is Social Interaction. Even as the sole survivor of the 4th generation, I'm still far behind on the knowledge about interpersonal relationships given the nature of the White Room. Therefore, I tried my best to cram as much information as I can as soon as I decided on my so-called goal.

For instance, the majority of young people that are around my age should supposedly be rich in hobbies and interests. Some of these were: fashion, sports, making lots of friends, being in a relationship, or the so-called "Otaku" culture; which includes liking things such as video games, light novels, anime, and manga.

That's only the tip of the iceberg. I only had little time on my hands, so I never really got in-depth with any of them. However, being aware of those things alone will be a very big help in how I would want to conduct myself in the near future.

There was a multitude of things that I needed to read up on about basic social interactions-- not just those. And because this environment was a totally new battleground for me, it doesn't matter how book-smart I was if I can't put my knowledge into practice.

Personality-wise, I tried putting on some fake faces but figured that I won't be able to keep them up for long. That's why I decided to just go with my real personality. I thought that it won't really be detrimental to my future plans as a student.

I worked extra hard on understanding the social construct of what a typical high school society is supposed to be, as well as how classroom politics works in some ways. However, they were all very basic and shallow at most. For this, the best method is to learn by hand, which I am sure will not be a pleasant experience.

"Superiors? Well, it's obvious that both of you and the old woman



there have been alive longer than I have. There is no doubt about that. However, the word 'superior' implies that you're referring to someone of a higher position. In addition, we have another problem. Even though our ages are different, wouldn't you agree that you have an impertinent attitude and are being extremely rude?" The blond man argued with grace.

Well, going back to reality, this situation will likely be my first step into this alien biosphere... but I'm more than willing to give it a try as a test for myself.

"Wha-?! You're a high schooler, aren't you?! You should just be quiet and--" I interrupted the office lady before things get out of hand.

"Um, excuse me. I'm sorry that I didn't notice you earlier. Please take my seat instead." I told the old lady.

"Oh, is that so, young man? Thank you very much!" The old lady replied with an aged smile.

There was visible discomfort on her face when the office lady and the blond man were arguing-- most likely because they attracted the crowd's attention. The genuine look of gratefulness on her face was quite a pleasant sight. The elderly woman repeatedly expressed her gratitude before finally being guided by the office lady into my now-vacant seat.

I sneaked a glance towards the blond man who looked perfectly unperturbed, like what transpired just now was an event that didn't involve him in the first place. I was aware of the attention I just garnered, and truth be told, I was quite uncomfortable with it. I know that they looked at me like I was a very good person, but that was beside the point. I'm just not used to this yet.

Setting the negatives aside, I'd say it was a pretty good practice of social interaction. However, before I could mind my own business and wait for the ride to finish while standing, a cute voice rang from behind me.

As I slightly turned my head around, a pretty-faced, short-haired girl met my eyes.

"Good job on that one. Have you been a step behind, I'd be the one to speak up for the poor old lady's sake, you know?" she said, with a smile.

This girl was already standing at the start of her ride. With that in mind...

"Well, it was my fault for being absent-minded in the first place. I really wouldn't have noticed the old lady if it wasn't for that commotion. You were already standing, right? If I did notice, I might have offered you my seat too," I said, looking away at her.

"Wow. If it wasn't for your monotone way of speaking, I would've



immediately thought you were hitting on me," she chuckled.

I tried to turn to her once again, but I didn't fully commit, only facing her general direction.

"I wasn't planning on doing so. I'm sorry if that's how I came off. It only felt natural to me, as a guy, to offer my seat to a girl." Or at least, that's what I read.

This is pretty hard. I only tried to sound friendly, but I guess lines like those are considered "*hitting on someone*"? I need to be more careful next time.

"Hehe, I see. I'm Kushida Kikyuu, by the way. I'm in Class D starting this year. How about you?" I'm amazed. This girl is the complete opposite of me. Even I can tell that she's a natural when it comes to social interactions. It might be a good idea to establish some sort of friendly relationship with her as soon as possible. For now, I think that's pretty easy. After all...

"I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, also in Class D."

It would be pretty rude to not face her while introducing myself, so I did. Talk about luck. A social expert like Kushida being in the same class as me was a godsend.

"Eh?! You're in Class D, too? What a coincidence!" Showcasing her adept social ability, Kushida managed to perfectly control the volume of her voice despite her genuinely surprised reaction.

"Yeah, what a coincidence," I parroted.

"Well then, nice to meet you, Ayanokouji-kun. You can call me Kikyuu if you want," she offered with a smile.

"I'd prefer to call you Kushida for now. It would be weird if I suddenly call you by your given name while you refer to me with my surname," I replied.

"I see. That's fine then," she chuckled cutely.

To be honest, I predicted her to press on with "why don't we call each other by our first names then?" or something along those lines, but I guess I still can't grasp the mind of an expert social elite.

Not long after our talk, the bus ride came to a halt as we reached the gate of the campus.

This is it. This is the start of my high school life... As a White Room Student, I shouldn't be here, but thanks to Matsuo's advice, I made the impossible possible.

"Ayanokouji-kun, should we walk to our classroom together?" Kushida asked with an angelic smile.

Any man would be a fool were they to refuse such an offer.

I nodded in response as I walked towards her waiting figure.



*Author's Notes:*

*In this timeline, Kiyotaka chose to be proactive and gave up his seat. The scene where he stared at Horikita Suzune did not happen, making their iconic first interaction after the bus ride nonexistent. Meanwhile, because of Kiyotaka's timing, Kikyou did not get into an argument with the blond man, which was obviously Kouenji Rokusuke. Those events produced a little domino effect into Kiyotaka befriending Kikyou early on.*

*I'm curious to see your thoughts on the current and possible future alterations due to the changes in Kiyotaka's initial goal and choices.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 1.2 - The Point System

Whilst walking to our classroom, Kushida and I engaged in small talk. Being the expert between the two of us, of course, she's the one who spoke first.

"So, Ayanokouji-kun, do you know anyone from your junior high who's attending this school?" she asked.

This should be a pretty natural conversation, but it's a really bad topic for me. Because I did not attend junior high, I thought about making a fake backstory that I would stick with if these kinds of topics ever come up in a conversation. However, I immediately discarded that line of thinking because it was too risky. If I start this with a lie, I should be a hundred percent consistent, but that's simply impossible.

I don't know anyone apart from Kushida and myself. Should I name a random middle school, it'll be harder and harder to keep that lie up as time goes on, even with an elaborate backstory. With all this in mind, I just came up with a half-truth in order to solve all my problems.

"Unfortunately, no. I just came back from abroad, after all," I said, like a line from a script.

A half-truth indeed. The White Room was a facility located deep within the mountains. Even if it was somewhere in Japan, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it another country.

"Ehh, so does that mean I'm your first friend here in this school?" she asked with glittering eyes.

Safe... Things would've been more complicated if she asked me the name of the country.

"Probably. How about you?" I replied and asked.

"We're on the same boat! None of my junior high friends made it to this school, you see." Kushida clapped her hands once in excitement.

I expected her expression to turn melancholic in her last sentence, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"I see. Well then, I'm looking forward to getting along with you this year," I said.

"Same here!"

If I was a normal person, I would probably be head over heels towards Kushida already. Her whole schtick of acting really cute



and friendly would break any man's emotional defense. I'd be lying if I say that my heart isn't racing at this moment. As expected of a social elite.

The two of us reached the classroom in no time. Like what I read from my research, time goes by a lot faster when you're talking with friends. Is this what they meant by it?

Well, I'd probably have this sentimental belief if I wasn't aware of how dopamine releases make your internal clock or subjective sense of time faster...

"Well then, I'd like to know some of my new classmates for now. I'll talk to you later, Ayanokouji-kun!" Kushida announced with vigor.

She's really going at it, huh? I want her to give me some of that enthusiasm and confidence, if possible...

I walked toward the seat that bore my nameplate. It was at the back of the room, near the window. A good place to sit, generally. Looking around, the classroom was approximately sixty percent full. During this free time, I should be working my butt off with making friends as soon as possible, but as expected, I just can't seem to find the right timing.

Right before I forced myself to stand in order to blend in with the crowd, a girl sat beside me.

Oh, I remember her. Back on the bus, she was sitting beside me from the opposite aisle while reading a book. The girl simply sat upright after placing her bag on her desk. She gave me the impression of a hard-to-approach honor student.

"Is there a problem?" she glanced, noticing my gaze.

Now that I got a good look at her face, she was certainly beautiful. If anyone tells me that she was a year or two older, I'd probably believe them. She gives off the vibe of a cool beauty.

"Sorry. I thought I saw your face before. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were riding on the same bus as me earlier, right?" I asked.

"You might be right. If my memory serves me well, you were the one who offered that old lady a seat. I suppose I should thank you for ending that noisy commotion," she replied with a sigh.

"I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, nice to meet you." I took this chance to introduce myself.

She paused for a second to stare at me. After a short moment, she sighed and opened her mouth.

"I'm Horikita Suzune," she replied.

Before I could decide on how to continue this conversation, I noticed the presence of someone at the classroom entrance.

"This seems like a rather well-equipped classroom. It would appear to live up to people's expectations, hmm?" Turns out, it was



the blond man who argued with the office lady not too long ago.

"This seems like an unpleasant omen..." Horikita sighed once more.

Without paying attention to anyone besides himself, he sat on the seat labeled "Kouenji". It's like no one else was present inside the room. Apparently, the rude comments he said on the bus were accurate reflections of his opinions. His imposing nature prompted everyone in the classroom to draw away from him.

Oh crap. When I looked back towards the seat beside me, Horikita was already immersed in reading her book. I can see that she was reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Perhaps Horikita's taste in books was reflected in her personality. Anyway, I just missed my chance to befriend her due to the loss of conversational back-and-forth.

I can probably converse with her again if I try to talk about the book, but I think it's pretty disrespectful to interrupt her at this moment.

Alright. For now, I should survey every one of my classmates and plan on who I want to talk to when the chance arrives. I will base my choices on outward impressions. The top pick for the guys will surely be that one handsome boy in the front. Not only is he talking comfortably with his peers, but he also looked like he got the atmosphere under his control. For the girls, it would undoubtedly be Kushida. Other than her, there were a lot of other girls who initially looked like they were on the same level, but apart from the girl with waist-length blond hair, none of them seemed as natural.

While I was lost in thought, the first bell rang. At that precise moment, a woman entered the classroom. If I had to guess her age, a safe bet would be thirty despite her younger look. Her black hair was tied in a ponytail, and paired with her suit and delicate features, she looked like someone who firmly believed in discipline.

"Ahem. Good morning to you, students. I'm the instructor for Class D. My name is Chabashira Sae. I usually teach Japanese History. However, at this school, we do not change classrooms for each grade. For the next three years, I will be acting as your homeroom teacher, so I hope to get to know all of you. It's a pleasure to meet you. The entrance ceremony will be in the gymnasium one hour from now, but first, I will distribute written materials with information about this school's special rules. I will also hand out the admission guide," she announced.

The students in the front seats passed the familiar documents to the students behind them. Eventually, they reach my hands.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing School differed from other Japanese high schools in a few key ways. All students



are required to live in dormitories located within the school's premises. Also, except for special cases, like interschool events, students were forbidden to contact anyone outside the school. Even then, you are only permitted to come in contact with other participants during the event. In addition to this; contact with your immediate family was forbidden without authorization. Naturally, leaving the school grounds without permission was also strictly forbidden.

On the other hand, the campus is equipped with many excellent facilities. With its own karaoke spot, theater, cafe, boutique, and more, you could easily compare this school to a small city, being more than 600,000 square meters in size.

This school also boasted another unique feature: The S System.

"I will now hand out your student ID cards. By using your ID cards, you can access any of the facilities on campus, purchase goods from the store, and so on. As you can already infer, it acts like a credit card. However, it is imperative that you pay attention to the points that you spend. At this school, you can use your points to buy anything. Anything located in the school premises is available for purchase," explained Chabashira-sensei.

I see... I think I have an idea of what's going on here...

Our points acted as a kind of currency. The absence of physical money would prevent a lot of financial troubles for students. Still, they are advised to keep an eye on their spending habits.

"Your student cards can be used simply by swiping them through the machine scanner. The method is simple, so you shouldn't get confused. Points are automatically deposited into your account on the first of every month. You should all have received 100,000 points already. Keep in mind that one point is worth one yen. No further explanation should be necessary." The classroom erupted after hearing her.

If it was my usual lax attitude, I would've done nothing other than praise the school and its budget. However, I can conclude that something else is going on here...

#### *Author's Notes:*

*The scene where Chabashira-sensei explained the basics of the school was pretty much the same as the original.*

*Unlike in the original series, however, Suzune didn't have any bad first impression of Kiyotaka. Therefore, she didn't refuse his self-introduction*



*and simply introduced herself in return.*

*Meanwhile, because Kiyotaka's goal was to use all of his abilities to test himself, he was nothing short of prepared. During his research, he was already skeptical about the details of the school's unique point system. Because the specifics were hidden from the public eye, Kiyotaka acted as vigilant as possible and connected a few dots.*

*Up next will be the biggest turning point for Kiyotaka's position in class and Class D's point situation.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 1.3 - Against the Class

A 100,000-yen monthly allowance was no joke. If students receive them unconditionally, it will surely pose future problems, even for a government as rich as Japan's. That's not even counting the cost of maintaining every top-tier facility inside the campus.

"Shocked by the amount of points you've been given? This school evaluates its students' talents. Everyone here has passed the entrance examination, which itself speaks to your value and potential. The amount you've received reflects the evaluation of your worth. You can use your points without restraint. After graduation, however, all of your points return to the school. Because it's impossible to exchange your points for cash, there's no advantage to saving them. Once points have been deposited into your account, it's up to you on how to spend them. Do as you like. In the event that you don't want to spend your points, you may transfer them to someone else. However, extorting money from your peers is not allowed. This school monitors bullying very carefully." Chabashira-sensei finished.

As bewilderment spread among the students, Chabashira-sensei looked over the room.

"Well, it appears no one has any questions. I hope that you enjoy your time here as students-" Before she could turn around and leave, I raised my hand and called for her attention.

"Sensei, may I ask you a few questions?"

The cheering stopped as soon as they heard me. Every single one of my classmates' eyes was glued towards me, even Horikita.

"You're Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun, right? Feel free to ask your question. I'll answer anything that I'm permitted to," she replied.

I should probably get used to this by now. If I'm going to establish myself as an exemplary student, attention was a natural outcome.

"Firstly I'm concerned about the mechanic of transferring points. To make sure that no one gets scammed during a negotiation, is there a system that can avoid that?" I asked.

My question rose to a clamor among my classmates.

"I didn't think of that," said one guy.

"It's a good thing he asked that..." said one girl.

This question was a pretty good opener to get their undivided



attention. I established a little bit of my practical thinking which would surely make them trust me, even if it's just a teeny-tiny bit.

"There is, actually. If negotiations with complicated conditions ever happen, you can make them foolproof by signing a memorandum. In short, a contract system. Any other questions?" answered Chabashira-sensei.

I predicted that they would at least have that system in place. At this moment, Chabashira-sensei's disinterested expression has changed to that of curiosity. But now that everything's set up, I'll amp it up to my main question.

"Then, can you please explain the details of the point system?" I asked in a neutral yet serious manner.

Once again, my classmates started to murmur. In my peripheral vision, Horikita was especially staring at me with quite an intensity. You could even say that she was glaring at me at this point.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot do that." Chabashira-sensei declined my question, but instead of looking apologetically or angry, she smiled instead.

"Why? Can you please tell us the reason?" I pressed on.

"No. Those are questions that are beyond my authority to answer." She looked at me with a smirk.

It's like she was challenging me to continue. 'Is that all? Make me spill the beans, boy' is what I infer from her expression.

"I see... Then, Sensei, you said that anything inside the campus can be bought by points, right?" I asked with the same neutral expression.

"Yes." That's the final nail in the coffin.

"Then... can I buy that explanation from you?"

That question basically turned the murmurs of my classmates into audible gasps.

Towards those words, Chabashira-sensei's eyes lit up as she chuckled in response.

"Amazing, Ayanokouji-- or should I say, '*as expected*'?" She acted like a completely different person now. And also; '*as expected*'? Does she know something about me?

"Anyway, the answer to your question... is yes." Chabashira-sensei's smirk widened a bit. "However for you to buy that information, mere private points won't be enough."

At this point, my classmates started catching on.

"Mere private points? What are you talking about, Chabashira-sensei?" The handsome guy that I was observing earlier asked with a concerned look.



"As I said, I won't say anything. However, I can give the whole class a choice. After all, this is something that involves everyone." She turned to my confused classmates and asked a loaded question. "Alright, Class D. I can't go into details, but if you were all listening carefully, Ayanokouji-kun here wants to buy some information using points. According to the school's rules, this is permitted. But, without getting specific, this will result in all of you losing a part of your allowance next month."

In an instant, voices of retaliation rang out.

"Hell no! I don't want anything to touch my hundred thousand yen!" The boy who sat in the chair labeled "Ike" yelled.

"The heck? Who cares about that explanation anyways? I wanna get outta here and spend my money already!" The boy that should be named "Yamauchi" cried.

Alongside the two of them, a bunch of fashionista-type girls was also complaining. Because of my previous observations of my classmates, I'd say that this was a predictable outcome. As I thought, my position right now feels really troublesome, but it's not like I can't get out of it. Let's just hope that they have enough comprehension to get what I'll be saying.

"Sensei, can I try to convince my classmates for a brief moment?" I asked.

"Sure. We still have a little over half an hour before homeroom ends," replied Chabashira-sensei.

After nodding, I turned a little bit so everyone can see my face from any angle. All of my classmates' attention shifted back to me. Some looked irritated, and some looked pissed. However, there were many who looked either scared or concerned. That's a good sign, at least.

"First of all, I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Nice to meet you all." I don't know if introducing myself was necessary, but doing it right now should etch my name into their minds. "All of you should also be wondering, am I right? Is it really possible for a school to unconditionally supply a 100,000-yen monthly allowance for every single student? Surely, some of you are skeptical."

That was a strong first argument by me. Even those who were too happy about getting such a large amount of money should be heading back from cloud nine now.

"Um, I agree with Ayanokouji-kun. Can we all talk about this for a second?" Kushida came to my rescue.

Her intervention is such a huge help in stabilizing the class's mental state. After all, she seemed to already get along with a bunch of our classmates from that short span of time before the first bell rang. As expected of her.



"Thank you, Kushida-san." This is the best payment I can give her; saying her name and making everyone aware of her too.

Although to be honest, it's only a matter of time before she is known by not just my classmates, but also students from other classes. That's a social elite for you.

"This is the first time we've all met. There's no way I can make you trust me fully, and that's fine. However, what Chabashira-sensei said earlier was the real piece of evidence that we needed. 'This will result in all of you losing a part of your allowance next month' she says. Isn't that weird? The system was explained to us like this school was a paradise. However, there's no way we can partake in all those privileges with no strings attached. My point is, firstly, from what she just said, it is indeed possible for our monthly points to decrease. And secondly, why would such a simple explanation fetch such a high price?" I explained.

I glanced at the handsome boy, indicating that I wanted him to take part in the conversation.

"Ayanokouji-kun, are you saying that there are situations that might lead us to lose our points?" he asked.

Nice follow-up, whatever-your-name-is-kun.

"Yes. Think about it. If asking for an explanation takes away points from the entire class, then that information must be pretty vital. I don't know every single one of you here, but I can tell that many of you are planning to spend your points on things involving your hobbies and interest, apart from daily necessities." A lot of them are still skeptical of my words, but almost everyone is putting on a wondering expression.

As usual, the boy named Kouenji was still sitting with his legs on his table, acting like this doesn't involve him at all.

"The details on the class system are unknown. If we are unaware of what this point system is all about, we might make the mistake of being in a worse situation. This will be a shot in the dark, but if buying Sensei's explanation is the wrong choice, I am more than willing to compensate with my own points." As soon as I said the last part of my sentence, the uproar started once again.

"Ayanokouji-kun, I don't think you need to go that far..." said the handsome boy.

"Hirata-kun is right. Even I can tell that you're doing this for the rest of the class..." Kushida followed up.

So his name is Hirata, huh? I was thankful for their help because they were extremely useful at this moment.

There's little to no chance that I can convince a bunch of teenagers to appeal to my demand when it's obviously detrimental to them, especially since this is the first time they've ever met me.



All I can do to increase my chances is to present them with some sort of evidence that it is more beneficial for them in the long run. Well, that works on my rational, smart classmates. For the slower ones like the boys named Ike and Yamauchi, who would probably think with their emotions, the assistance by Hirata and especially Kushida, was a lot more helpful.

Around this time, Horikita stood up and asked me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, how sure are you about all this?" A simple, but powerful question.

"I'd say about 99%. That's why I want to compensate with my own points if the 1% happens. I don't mind spending all of them each month to make up for each of our classmate's losses. I can sign a memorandum to prove my resolve on this."

I think that should do it. If the majority still decides to pass up on my suggestion to buy this key information, then all I can do is think up some other ways to get it.

"Alright. I'm with you on your decision." Horikita sat back down with her eyes fixated on me.

"Me too. I trust Ayanokouji-kun," followed Kushida.

"Is there anyone who objects?" Hirata asked the class.

With Horikita's strong attitude and Kushida's initial influence, followed by Hirata's question, the class turned silent.

"If... Kushida-chan says she trusts him, then I will too," said a soft-spoken girl.

"If things go wrong, you need to pay! Alright, Ayanokouji?!" Yamauchi shouted.

"I will. Don't worry," I replied.

Shortly after, every single one of them gave in to peer pressure and decided that they will "trust" me on this one.

"It seems like the whole class has come to a decision." Chabashira-sensei's smile was unwavering. "Ayanokouji-kun, consider your purchase complete."

#### *Author's Notes:*

*Alright, this is the biggest shift from the main timeline so far. If everything goes smoothly after Chabashira-sensei's explanation about the S System, or the Point System, as we know it, then Kiyotaka will instantly be placed at the top of Class D's social hierarchy. I mean, come on. We all know Kiyotaka deserves that place.*

*Anyway, feel free to give me some constructive criticism on this one.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 1.4 - Against the System

"Alright, Class D. Open your ears and listen carefully." Chabashira-sensei started with a stern tone.

Seriously, she acted absolutely indifferent towards our class when she first arrived, but now she's talking enthusiastically.

At this moment, every single student in our class looked serious, even the ones who gave the impression of incompetence and a lackadaisical attitude. Well, this may be a matter of life and death for their dream high school life, so I guess it's understandable.

"First of all, the points in this system can be classified into two. The 100,000 points that you have right now are called '*private points*'. Meanwhile, there's also a little something known as '*class points*'," said Chabashira-sensei.

The class started murmuring to themselves but immediately returned to silence once they noticed Chabashira-sensei's pause.

"Alright, let's continue. Every single freshman class, from A to D, is given 1000 class points at the start of the year because they passed the entrance exam. These class points are then converted into private points and are deposited into your accounts at the start of each month. With this in mind, you could conclude that class points are updated each month," she explained.

"Class points can indeed be decreased, but they can also be increased. In this school, we have what we call 'special exams', where each class will compete against each other. Based on your performance in these special exams, class points can either increase, decrease or stay the same." Chabashira-sensei closed her eyes indicating the end of her explanation... No, she was waiting for questions.

"Se-"

"Sensei, may I ask a question? Oh, you can go first, Horikita." I was a split-second earlier and beat Horikita to the punch.

"No, it's fine, Ayanokouji-kun. You can go ahead and ask your question first." She politely refused my offer.

"Go ahead," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"Alright." I nodded to Horikita before standing up. "Are there any outside factors that can influence our class points other than the special exams?"

"You cannot increase your class points outside of special exams.



However, you can definitely decrease them. For example, tardiness, absences, sleeping in class, not listening during the discussions, and using your phones during lessons. Those are all things that can decrease your class points. I apologize in advance, but the details of the math with the deduction of the points themselves are strictly confidential, so I won't delve into those." Chabashira-sensei answered straight. Surely, she was expecting that question. "Sigh... If I wasn't compelled to explain this bit, I would never want to do so. Like, you're all high school students. It's only natural to follow these common school etiquettes."

The whole class gulped. It was evident that a lot of them were planning to do exactly those things, and focus on enjoyment using the money they have. They must be thanking me internally for making them dodge such a lethal bullet. To be honest, even I was severely surprised with Chabashira-sensei's revelations. This school really is something.

"You really saved their skins there, Ayanokouji-kun. I can only imagine the amount of class points we'd lose if we didn't take this gamble with you." Horikita said with a sigh.

"You can just consider it as me saving myself. Also, go ahead and ask your question now," I said, to which Horikita shook her head in response.

"My question was the same as yours." I see. So that was the case, after all.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you still have something on your mind, don't you?" Horikita said as she observed my thinking self, and she was absolutely right.

I nodded before raising my hand once more.

"Sensei, may I ask another question?"

At this point, the whole class was simply watching a conversation between me and Chabashira-sensei. While they can think of valid questions to ask, they can't quite formulate them at the same speed that I do. For example, there was a male student seated on the chair labeled "Yukimura", who certainly looked ready to ask a question, yet he backs out at the last minute.

"Sure, go ahead." There it is again. Chabashira-sensei's semi-sinister smile.

"What's the point of all this?" I asked a question that even my classmates didn't quite understand.

Audible *'huh?'*s and *'what?'*s can be heard all over the room.

"Finally. Alright, you slowpokes. For those who couldn't understand Ayanokouji-kun's question, I'll lay it all down for you. Firstly, what's the point of class points and private points apart from being your monthly allowance? And lastly, what's the point of



competing with other classes through special exams?" Chabashira-sensei's smile widened as she uttered her next set of explanations. "You've noticed that the four classes are labeled as Class A, B, C, and D, right? Well, that's not just for appearances' sake. Class A is the most promising class, filled with the most excellent set of students that have entered the school this year. They are followed by Class B, C, and of course, you guys, Class D. It's just like the system you'd find in major cram schools."

When they thought everything started making sense, Chabashira-sensei's new revelations shattered their minds once more.

"Do you understand? In other words, you guys are the lowest of the low, the last bastion of failures- a bunch of '*defects*'. Oh, don't be surprised now. Class D students have been referred to using that word for a while now." Chabashira-sensei waved her hand as if to tell us to not mind what she just said.

Yukimura, who was been listening silently, stood up in anger.

"What do you mean, Sensei?! Are you saying that I... we... are all defects and failures?!" Yukimura reproached.

"That's how the school judged and sorted you upon entry. Of course, you can be promoted and replace a higher class should you surpass them in terms of class points." Chabashira-sensei repeated her point.

Yukimura sat back down, but he absolutely looked like he wanted to say more. Of course, he wasn't satisfied with Chabashira-sensei's answer. Based on his appearance alone, he looked like some who studies really hard. Well, that's a bit of a disrespectful assumption on my part. Just because he has glasses doesn't mean he's studious. It's just that it's the impression that his appearance and attitude gave me.

I looked at Horikita to probe if she was planning to ask a question about this revelation, and to my surprise, she turned to look at me around the same time I did. I nodded, prompting her to be the one to ask a question. I'm not sure if we're thinking of the same one, but I figured that I'd give her the chance to ask. She was considerate enough to check up on me, after all.

"Sensei, may I ask you a question?" Horikita raised her hand.

"Go ahead," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"This school boasts the highest rates of advancement in the whole country. Does that mean that as long we overtake Class C, we can guarantee our future?" asked Horikita.

So we were thinking of the same question, after all.

Hearing those words seemed like a wake-up call for most of my classmates. After all, getting accepted into a good college or directly into the workforce had been their main purpose for enrolling here.



"Nothing comes easy in this world, Horikita-san. If you want to achieve your so-called bright future, your only option is to overtake Class A. This school guarantees nothing for other students." Chabashira-sensei coldly answered.

For my classmates, those were the words of a grim reaper. Their dreams of a guaranteed future were immediately sunk down the drain the moment they realized their positions. Well, that's apart from Kouenji, who still didn't care about anything that was happening around him. He smilingly continued to polish his nails...

"What's with those faces? Weren't you all saved just now? If it weren't for Ayanokouji-kun's suggestion to buy all of this information using your class points, you would've been in the dark for the first month. I can only imagine the atrocious results of your blissful ignorance by then." Chabashira-sensei shrugged her shoulders after drawing attention to me.

"With someone like him leading this class, I believe you all got a big chance of taking over Class A in the future. To give reference to Ayanokouji-kun's display of quick thinking and intellect, no freshman in the history of this school has ever been able to figure out the point system's true purpose on the first day. While you may think it's an obvious strategy now, did you think that mediocre people like you would come up with his idea to try and buy information? From a teacher, no less." Geez, what a way to elevate me in my classmates' minds...

Right now, everyone inside the classroom had their eyes on me. With Chabashira-sensei mentioning it, the figurative position of a class leader would surely fall on me in the near future. This is not a bad start. Taking advantage of the silence...

"One last question, Sensei. How much did explaining the point system cost?" I didn't raise my hand, nor did I wait for Chabashira-sensei to give me permission to speak.

"200 class points." She gave a clear-cut answer. "If that's all, then I suppose I could dismiss the class now. Take the information I gave you this time and use them to your advantage. Don't let the deadweight morons hold you back. Don't forget to attend the entrance ceremony, ten minutes from now."

With those parting words, Chabashira-sensei walked out of the classroom with poise.

As soon as her figure disappeared, I looked toward Hirata who was also looking at me. I nodded and let his amazing social skills do their magic.

"Everyone, may I please have your attention?"

The entire class was completely silent after Chabashira-sensei left. They still seem to be in the process of digesting the information she



gave us. Hirata clapped his hands in order to get their attention.

"I would've liked us to introduce ourselves since we don't know each other yet, but we only have less than ten minutes left before the entrance ceremony. As we've all heard from our teacher earlier, we can't risk ditching nor arriving late in the entrance ceremony since it might risk us losing some class points... For now, I would like to hear your thoughts on the events that occurred just now, Ayanokouji-kun..." Hirata's smile was genuine yet strained. Surely, he was still concerned after hearing everything about this school's S-System.

I stood up and waited for everyone to face me. Well, it didn't take long.

"I'm sure many of you are wondering. After Chabashira-sensei praised my so-called intellect, why was I placed here in Class D? I would like to explain all of those in near future, but for now, I would like all of you to hear me out." The atmosphere turned tense without my intention. "Firstly, as much as I would like to hold a class meeting in order to gather our thoughts as a class, we don't want Class C, B, and A to get suspicious of us, so let's wait until tomorrow. Secondly, we are the only class that holds this very important information. Should this leak to other classes, our only advantage will disappear instantly. Remember, we bought all of that information using 200 class points. Since everyone else has 1000 class points while we have 800, we're still dead last. There's no merit in telling other classes about what we learned today."

Most of them were nodding at my words while others listened intently.

"Lastly, this system tells us that our solidarity as a class will be the most important thing in the next three years. I hope we can work together as one team in all of the trials to come." I finished with a slight bow.

Despite my monotone way of speaking, the entire class was still moved. Hirata clapped his hands and everyone excluding a handful of people followed suit. Huh... Acting like this sure is an effective method to garner everyone's trust. It was a good thing that I prepared for this.

Now then, my next objective would be to get to know all of my classmates and take note of who to pay attention to. This way, I can effectively and fully utilize any of their abilities that would prove to be useful in the future.



*Author's Notes:*

*First of all, the cost of the information about the Point System being 200 points can be pinpointed during the start of the Year 2 Volumes. Nanase mentioned that all first-year classes received 800 class points at the start of their year. In exchange, they were already aware of the Point System.*

*Also, Suzune has nothing but chad-impressions towards Kiyotaka from the start. Hence, her rather polite attitude towards him.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 2.1 - Small Talk

Not long after my speech, every one of us prepared to leave. As I got up, I immediately gave Hirata a look. He nodded and came to me as I walked in Kushida's direction. When she noticed us, she stopped talking with her friends and turned to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, do you need something?" Kushida asked in a slightly serious manner.

"Is it alright if the three of us walk together on our way to the gymnasium?" I offered.

"I see. I don't mind," said Hirata.

"Alright. I'll go with you two." Surprisingly, Kushida also agreed.

The two of them could help me a lot in the future. Their looks and social abilities are both top-tier. I would like to get close to them as soon as possible.

"Mii-chan, Ruri-chan, Kokoro-chan... I'll be going ahead with Ayanokouji-kun and Hirata-kun for now. Is that alright?" Kushida asked permission from her friends.

"I-It's alright, Kikyou-chan. I bet it's something important so don't mind us," said the twin-tailed, blue-haired girl surnamed "Wang".

Around Wang, Kushida's other friends nodded in unison. How enviable. Kushida has such gentle friends. I looked at them and nodded my head, to which they responded with a slight bow.

"Everyone, let's all come to the gymnasium together. There shouldn't be any need to form lines while heading there, but let's observe proper behavior and etiquette when we reach the place." Hirata announced with an amicable tone.

As expected, it was the right choice to choose him. While only the students near his seat gave an audible reply, everyone practically agreed in their minds.

Whilst walking, Hirata immediately spoke to me.

"This is the first time that we've actually talked. I'm Hirata Yousuke. Nice to meet you, Ayanokouji-kun. You don't need to be formal with me, so calling me Yousuke is fine." He offered his hand, and I shook it.

"Nice to meet you. For now, I think I'll just call you Hirata. I'm not used to calling other people around my age by their first names, you see," I replied.

"That's totally fine," smiled Hirata.



If I was a girl, I would've already been smitten by that smile.

"Thank you for getting my signals earlier. The assistance that you and Kushida-san gave me was the deciding factor that made me convince the class." I thanked the two of them with a slight bow.

"What are you saying, Ayanokouji-kun? I honestly think we barely helped. As Chabashira-sensei said earlier; if it wasn't for your quick thinking, who knows what could've happened to our class..." Kushida returned the praise to me. Not saying "class points" exhibited her superb awareness.

"Yeah... Thinking about it now, you really saved the entire class..." Hirata said.

"All's well and done now, so we can only move forward. We can't really talk about anything crucial while walking to the gymnasium since we'll be in close proximity with students from other classes soon. So for now, I think I just want to get to know you two a little bit better. Do you mind if the three of us exchange contact info?" I spoke as naturally as I could, but according to my research, getting the contact information of your classmates is a pretty hard and delicate ordeal. I hope they don't reject me.

"Sure! Have you been a step behind, I would have asked for yours instead, Ayanokouji-kun," smiled Kushida.

"Somehow, I feel a sense of *deja vu*..." I said, not trying to make the same mistake as I did with Horikita earlier, I commented in a joking manner.

"Here's my mail address and number, Ayanokouji-kun. Wait, '*deja vu*'? Do you two know each other from your previous school? I didn't see you guys talk to each other when you came inside the classroom earlier, but Ayanokouji-kun already knew Kushida-san's name." Hirata asked, noticing my comment.

"You're wrong about that, Hirata-kun. Ayanokouji-kun and I rode the same bus this morning. I first talked to him there." Kushida chuckled in response.

"Yeah, and Kushida said something about doing something, have I been a step behind. That's a lot of somethings..." I joked while adding context to her words.

I pretended to not remember the specifics of that event. I called Kushida without honorifics, but I don't think it matters that much anymore.

"Hahaha. Ehh... So the two of you didn't go to the same middle school then?" Hirata asked, after laughing at my second attempt at cracking a joke. I don't know if what I said was really funny for him, but his laugh sounded genuine so I'll just stop thinking about it.

"Nope, but I do know that Ayanokouji-kun came from abroad,"



Kushida answered proudly.

"That's unexpected. Which country?" Hirata asked with his mouth slightly agape.

"America," I answered immediately.

"Ohh, how was it there?" Hirata continued with his questions.

"I can't say anything but '*normal*'. Enough about me though. What about you, Hirata? Tell us about yourself," I said.

It was a sloppy attempt to dodge the question, and I'm sure these two noticed it.

"Yeah, yeah," followed Kushida.

"Don't be relaxed now, Kushida-san. You're next, you know?" chuckled Hirata.

"Ehhh..." Kushida replied cutely.

"Well, first, I like soccer a lot. I think I'll join this school's Soccer Club whenever the student club fair starts," he said.

The three of us continued to talk about each other as we walked along the hallways. More and more students from other classes started blending in with us, Class D, as they headed towards the gymnasium. From an outsider's perspective, we probably looked like good friends who hit it off on the first day or old friends who reunited after graduating from junior high... Granted, I'm not as talkative as these two. Given my hasty preparation and zero experience, there's no way I can keep up with naturals like them. However, it's still a pleasant feeling.

Is this what it feels like to hang out with friends?

"Hirata-kun, did you know? The specific line that Ayanokouji-kun was talking about earlier with the *deja vu* was 'Have you been a step behind, I'd be the one to speak up for the poor old lady's sake, you know?'. You see, when we were riding the bus this morning, one of our classmates, Kouenji-kun, was arguing with an office lady," narrated Kushida.

While I was lost in thought, I suddenly heard Kushida drop my name. She's seriously gonna tell that story...? Well, whatever, I guess.

"Oh... He was the blond boy sitting in the middle, right? What were they arguing about?" Hirata asked curiously.

"Well, he was sitting on one of the priority seats with no intention of giving it up for a poor old lady." Kushida declaimed with a sad expression on her face.

"Seriously? With the imposing aura that he exuded in the classroom, I guess that's not an impossibility... However, that sort of behavior leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I can't say I like it." Hirata's expression didn't change much, but even I can tell how displeased he was upon hearing the story.



"Yeah... I tried to take action before things get out of hand, but before I could step in and help, Ayanokouji-kun got up from his own seat and offered it to the old lady!" she said, excitedly.

"As expected, you really are a good person, Ayanokouji-kun." Hirata gave me a warm smile.

"You guys give me too much credit. I just wanted the commotion to end. It was painful to watch their argument unfold," I said.

"See, Hirata-kun? Not only is he kind, but he's also super modest!" Kushida's enthusiasm didn't wane in the slightest. She even used my own words against me. As expected of her...

Our small talk continued for a short while until we reached the gymnasium to attend the entrance ceremony.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 2.2 - Connections

Nothing strange happened in the entrance ceremony. I took my time, subtly observing the students from other classes. It should be easy enough to take the spotlight, but according to Chabashira-sensei, everyone outside my own class can be considered an enemy. Of course, there's no need for open hostility. At the end of the day, we're still fellow high school students on the same campus. However, I should always remind my classmates to be extra vigilant when needed.

After all, in this school, you can't say things like *"you're being too serious about this"* or anything along those lines. Their futures are literally on the line.

Well, I say that, but thanks to me purchasing some information, only Class D is aware of how grave the situation is for those who aren't in Class A.

After the entrance ceremony, I have one major criticism towards my classmates, especially the likes of Ike and Yamauchi. They were too restless. Should there have been a student who exhibited the same vigilance that I had, they might have noticed my classmates' stiff behavior.

Students dispersed as soon as they got out of the gymnasium. Some went to the mall, called Keyaki Mall, while some went to the dorms. I thought about heading to the dorms to check out my room but...

"Ayanokouji-kun!" Kushida called out to me.

She wasn't alone though. She ran up to me with her friends in tow. Wait a minute... did they increase?

"Kushida, do you need something?" I asked.

"Well, my friends were wondering if they could exchange contact info with you as well..." Kushida asked with a smile.

"K-Kikyoku-chan, we told you not to say it like that!" exclaimed a girl with shoulder-length brown hair.

"Ah-haha... I didn't know how else I could phrase it. My bad." Kushida laughed guiltily while scratching her head.

"That's perfect. I was wondering how to get the contact information of my other classmates, so I guess this is a good start," I said, holding out my smartphone.

"Um, my name is Inogashira Kokoro... Nice to meet you,



Ayanokouji-kun." So the brown-haired girl is named Inogashira Kokoro.

"I'm Onodera Kayano! Nice to meet you!" An enthusiastic short-haired girl introduced herself right after.

"Um, my name is Wang Mei-Yu, but you can call me Mii-chan. Nice to meet you, Ayanokouji-kun..." The twin-tailed girl with blue hair is named Wang-- I mean Mii-chan.

After them, three more followed. They were Azuma Sana, Nishimura Ryuuko, and Ichihashi Ruri.

"Nice to meet you all. I'm looking forward to being in the same class." I bowed slightly.

For some reason, they kept staring at me.

"You're right, Kikyou-chan! Now that I get a closer look at him, Ayanokouji-kun really seems like he's super easy to talk to," said Onodera.

"Huh? What do you mean?" As a hatchling when it comes to social interaction, I have no idea what those words really meant.

"You don't get it, Ayanokouji-kun? Everyone thought you were nothing but a mysterious and quiet person, and then, you showed us a great display of intellect. You even saved the whole class with it. Combine those two and you get a rather-hard-to-approach-super-smart classmate," answered Kushida.

"I'm not sure I understand, but I see... Well, it's not like I don't want to talk with people. I'm just not good at it, I guess. And somehow, the look on my face adopted that same feature," I replied.

"Well, your way of speaking may sound monotonous right now, but with enough practice, you'll eventually get out of there!" Onodera gave me a thumbs up.

"Hopefully... I don't want to be mistaken as a robot with no emotions," I responded.

The girls laughed. It was a simple joke, but I'm glad it was received well. I didn't sense any so-called "pity laugh" from them, so I'm satisfied.

"You tried to sacrifice yourself for the class's sake. There's no way you don't have emotions," said Mei.

"Yeah, yeah!" The other girls echoed.

After some more pointless small talks, I successfully got the contact info of my classmates. They were all girls though.

The only guy in my contacts is Hirata, so I need to work on that front, too.

Kushida and her friends invited me for lunch, but I politely refused. It's certainly a rare opportunity, but social interaction and attention really drained me. I've had too much of it in the short span of a few hours.



I decided to swing by the convenience store before making my way to the dormitories. Before I could reach the door, Horikita came out with a plastic bag in hand.

"Ayanokouji-kun..." Horikita uttered my name the moment she saw me.

"Horikita....-san." I hesitated, and now I look like a fool.

"Call me however you like. I don't mind," she said coolly.

"Then... Suzune?" Wow. I'm impressed with myself for having the balls to suggest that.

"Apart from that. I don't let people use my first name easily." Horikita leered at me.

"That was a joke. My bad, Horikita," I apologized.

"Your way of speaking really makes it hard to distinguish," Horikita responded, attacking my weak point. I'm inclined to believe that it wasn't intentional. Hopefully...

"It's just how I am. I can't do anything about it now, can I?" I shrugged my shoulders. "Anyway, how'd your shopping go?"

"I just bought some daily necessities," she replied.

"Well, it's always good to be early on those things. I guess I'll do the same then-" Before I could get the chance to say goodbye, Horikita interrupted me.

"Ayanokouji-kun... About earlier... I want to talk to you about it. Is that alright?" Horikita asked.

"I see. Let me buy a cheap lunch set for a bit. Are you okay with that?" I just assumed that she wanted to talk now. Her body language is crying 'ASAP' all over.

I wonder if it's a mix of panic and desperation.

"Yes. I'll wait for you," nodded Horikita.

She seems like a smart girl. Once I explain everything to the class tomorrow, I might need some extra brain to work with.

I walked in and saw another classmate. It was the red-haired guy who seemed pissed off all the time.

"Excuse me," I called out to him.

"Hah?" Geez, that's one scary expression.

"I'm Ayanokouji, from your class." I tried to sound as amicable as possible.

"Oh, it's you. What do you need?" Like a lightbulb flaring up inside his brain, his attitude turned a little bit gentler.

Huh. Is this the power of favors? It seems like even he felt a bit grateful about what I did during homeroom. He didn't act friendly, but at least he wasn't hostile.

"I just wanted to ask if what you bought is the cheapest ramen cup available. Because if it is, I'm also thinking of buying one," I said.



"Oh, this? I think so," he replied, putting on a thinking expression.

"I see. Thanks... uhh..." I tilted my head and slightly squinted my eyes.

"It's Sudou. I'm Sudou Ken." He seems to be looking at me with curiosity. Well, to be honest, that's ten times better than looking at me with killing intent.

"Thanks, Sudou. And nice to meet you." I waved my hand.

"Yeah, sure." He sounded a bit embarrassed.

After buying the said cup ramen, I immediately went out of the store. This is probably not healthy for me, but my boundless curiosity urged me to try this. It's the White Room's fault for not letting me try this sort of food.

"Who are you? I was already here. You're in the way. Get lost," barked Sudou.

When I got out, I saw three guys surrounding Sudou while he was sitting. His ramen wasn't opened yet... Was he waiting for me? Somehow, that made me happy.

"You hear this guy? 'Get lost,' he says. What a cocky little first-year punk." One of the guys mocked Sudou.

The three laughed in Sudou's face. Sudou shot up, throwing his unopened noodle cup to the ground.

"First-year punk,'? You tryin' to make fun of me, huh?!" Alright. I can conclude that Sudou has an extremely short fuse. He seemed like the type to immediately threaten anyone or anything that crossed him.

Horikita, who was initially watching from the sidelines, immediately tried to take action. When she saw me head out of the store, she quickly approached me. Horikita seemed to have given me the main role and decided to act as the support.

"Sudou, I'm done buying my lunch." I pretended to be oblivious and called out to him.

"Oh, friends of yours?" One of the guys raised an eyebrow seeing me and Horikita approach them.

"Second years...? Uh, are there any problems, senpai?" I asked, innocently.

"Well, this punk was sitting on our spot so we told him to piss off." The guy who answered me shrugged with a smirk.

"Do you think I won't beat you up just because you're an upperclassman?" Sudou was increasingly getting angrier. This could be bad.

"I see," I said, turning to Sudou. "Well, I was supposed to invite you to my room for lunch, so there's no point in staying here."

Sudou became visibly confused by my words.

"Come on, Sudou. Pick up your cup ramen and let's get out of



here." I looked straight into his eyes. Please get what I'm trying to say...

"Tch. But-" I repeated my words before he could say anything more.

"Come on, Sudou." I unintentionally increased the intensity of my tone.

That might've been a blunder. With Sudou's aggressive attitude, he might think that I'm picking a fight with him...

The upperclassman squinted their eyes and looked at me weirdly. However, their bodies instinctively stiffened with nervousness.

At the same time, Sudou looked at me with a surprised expression. His face slowly shifted into a frown... Crap.

"Sudou-kun, we'll only be wasting our time if we keep standing here. No one is really trying to pick a fight with you. These upperclassmen are just taunting you, and they won't stop unless you ignore them." Horikita spoke on my behalf.

Sudou seemed to remember what happened during homeroom because of Horikita's words. He finally got what I wanted to get across and clicked his tongue. He picked up his cup ramen and walked to our side.

I really hoped he would've gotten it without Horikita having to spell it out for him, though. I guess I expected too much.

"See you, Senpai(s)." I gave them a side glance.

"I initially thought you three were all Class D students. But apart from that red-headed moron, both of you seemed too composed. Are you from Class C, or perhaps, B?" One of the three guys glared at me.

Knowing what they meant, Sudou seemed just about done and ready to charge back in. It didn't help that they also called him a moron. Seeing the situation take a turn for the worse, I blocked Sudou's torso with my hand and stopped his approach.

"What could you ever mean, Senpai? What does our composure have to do with being placed in a certain class?" I asked.

"Hey, dude, shut your mouth," scolded the other guy.

The guy I asked kept glaring at me in annoyance.

"It means nothing. Tch. My mood is sour now. Let's just get the hell outta here."

And with that, they left without further hitches.

"Well, that was something..." I commented.

"I owe you one, Ayanokouji, and your friend, too... I don't know what would've happened if you two didn't come to help me. I get pissed really easily, you see. Especially with guys like those." Sudou glared toward the direction where the three disappeared.

"It's fine. As I said earlier, class solidarity is important. And it's



good that you're self-aware. Since you already know about your own problem, I want to ask you a favor to try and fix it," I said.

"Well... I'll try my best." Sudou scratched his head awkwardly.

He actually agreed. This wouldn't have been possible if I was a nobody. Getting the limelight early on really helps out a lot.

"Thank you. And sorry if I accidentally sounded hostile or demanding earlier," I apologized.

"Oh, that... Well, you've made it clear to me now that you weren't pickin' a fight, so it's fine. I was just surprised, and frankly, a bit spooked..." he said. "Especially..."

Sudou muttered something under his breath.

"I see. Well, with all that's said and done, do you wanna come to my room and eat lunch? I know I only used that story to back you up, but you can accept the offer if you want," I asked.

"Nah. I'll just eat here. It seems like you and this girl have something to talk about." He turned to Horikita.

"I'm Horikita Suzune. Nice to meet you, Sudou-kun." Horikita, who has been silent the entire time, took the chance to introduce herself with a cool, stoic expression.

"I'm Sudou Ken. Pleased to meet'cha." Sudou went ahead and opened his cup ramen, filling it up with hot water from the dispenser outside.

"See you tomorrow then." I waved at him, to which he gently waved back in response.

With that, Horikita and I tread toward the dorm areas.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*Kiyotaka doesn't know, but he pulled off that robot joke perfectly because of his monotonous delivery, which the girls found ironic and funny.*

*Because of the time Kiyotaka spent talking with Kushida and her friends, Sudou and Horikita were already done shopping by the time he reached the convenience store.*

*Due to what transpired in the first period, Sudou didn't make the careless mistake of forgetting to bring his ID card. Clout and kindness really helped Sudou calm down on this one.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 2.3 - Freedom

At the reception desk, Horikita and I received our room keycards, along with a handbook about the dorm rules for each of us. In addition to the basic things that we needed to know about our daily routines, there were also dates and times for garbage disposal, a notice to avoid making excessive noise, and notes about not wasting water or electricity.

"Amazing. I thought the school would deduct the cost from our points, but that doesn't seem to be the case at all," I muttered, with Horikita reading her own handbook beside me.

"They don't place any restrictions, even with gas usage," continued Horikita.

The two of us entered the elevator. According to my research, being stuck in an elevator will most likely lead to a big conversational disaster, but I didn't want silence between us. I'd like to keep talking while I can still think of something.

"My room is on the 4th floor. How about you?" I asked, pressing the number 4 button.

"It's on the 13th floor," she replied.

This school implemented co-ed dormitories, but of course, the rules stated that unsuitable romantic relationships were strictly forbidden. Well, that much is obvious...

After we reached the 4th floor, I turned to ask Horikita.

"Do you not want to check out your room before we talk? Once you enter mine, it'll be the first-ever room that you've entered in the dormitories," I joked. She criticized me before about the way I deliver my jokes. I'm prepared for the worst on this one.

"Do you think about things like those, Ayanokouji-kun? I'm not someone who dwells on something so trivial and sentimental. Besides, I ought to talk to you as soon as possible." Horikita coldly responded.

"I was joking, my bad." I scanned my keycard to unlock Room 401.

It seems like wanting to talk to me didn't mean Horikita wanted to make friends. I expected that much, but it's still a downer, to say the least.

Now that I think about it, Horikita didn't even mind that she was



going inside the room of a guy. She might think I'm harmless, but that's not enough reassurance for the difference in our body size should I do something dangerous. Of course, I'm not planning to do anything, but I didn't even realize the implications of our situation until now. Given my initial evaluation of her, Horikita doesn't seem like an airhead. In fact, it's the opposite.

I see. She knows martial arts-- or at least, that's the guess I'm willing to bet on.

Halting my line of thought, the two of us finally entered. My room was twelve to thirteen square meters big.

"Let's talk while eating," I said, putting my bag on top of the bed.

I picked up the vacuum electric water heater and filled it up. After Horikita put away her school bag gently on the floor, she took out the cheap lunch set she brought from the convenience store and put it on the dining table.

"You can go ahead and eat first."

"Alright," she replied, accepting my suggestion.

I sat across Horikita and now we were face-to-face with each other. Looking at her again, she really was beautiful. If she was more outgoing and friendly, she can easily stand beside the likes of Kushida in terms of popularity.

"First off, what did you want to talk about?" I started.

She swallowed her food gracefully before answering.

"I want to know what kind of person you are. According to Chabashira-sensei, being placed in Class D means that you're a defective product of some sort. I personally don't agree with that. I pride myself as an exemplary student. They must have made a mistake. I assume that you feel the same?" she elaborated.

"Hmm... I didn't think my placement in Class D was a mistake or anything, even after Chabashira-sensei told us everything. My entrance exam scores were below average, after all," I said, looking at the water heater.

Oh, it's done.

"How many points did you score?" She asked after swallowing another bite of her food.

Huh? Does she expect me to answer that? The exam results were never revealed.

"Fifty across the board," I answered, pouring the hot water into my cup ramen. "Well, at least that's what I think. Maybe I'll ask Chabashira-sensei for confirmation."

"You actually answered..." she said, vexingly shaking her head. "Alright. If I assume that what you're saying is true, then you would've been smart enough to manipulate your own scores."

"I answered your question jokingly. There's no way for me to



know what my scores really were."

"I guess that makes sense," she shrugged.

"And even I did, there's no such thing as me manipulating my answers. I might be sure about 60 questions for each subject, and I just deliberately secured 50 on a whim. But since the exam is worth 100 points, wouldn't that make me an average, if not a below-average student?"

"That's true, but did you really find the exam difficult?" she asked without delay.

If she's set on thinking that I'm a smart student, then there's no reason to make myself seem unintelligent in front of her. Doing that might become detrimental in the near future.

"Well, not really. The exam was easy enough for me, so I tried scoring all-fifties and see how it goes." Before she could ask why, I decided to deflect the question back to her. "How about you? You don't seem like someone who took the entrance exam lightly."

I opened it up and the smoke carried a nice aroma. I wonder what this would taste like. I'm kind of excited.

"Of course. I'm sure I scored well on the entrance exam... but they still put me in Class D. They must've made a mistake... Unless--" she gasped, finally catching on.

"Do you finally get it?" I asked. "I'm sure some of our classmates are dissatisfied because they think they scored well, too. However, Chabashira-sensei insisted that the sorting of students wasn't wrong in the least."

"They didn't just base it on the entrance exam itself, did they?" she muttered.

I nodded, slurping my first serving of cup ramen. Delicious.

"Think about it clearly. Chabashira-sensei sprinkled hints about the true nature of this school. She repeatedly stressed our doomed futures if we graduate in Class D. It makes sense from a futuristic standpoint since the workforce wouldn't readily accept a flawed graduate. That's probably why the statistics on this school's advancement rate were so high, focusing the sample size only on Class A students," I explained before slurping my noodles.

"What could possibly be my flaw...?" Horikita wondered with a pained expression.

"I only met you today, so I can't really say... But if I had to guess, maybe it's because of your demeanor?" This was a risky route to take. As much as possible, I'd like to avoid offending any of my classmates.

"What do you mean?" She glared at me.

"Well, I personally admire your calm and cool demeanor, but you give off the impression of someone who prefers to be alone." Even



without my knowledge of human psychology, I think it's still the impression she would give me.

"I prefer to be alone," she replied sternly.

I hit the mark, huh?

"Well, if you look at it from the perspective of a company owner, they wouldn't want to employ someone who can't work with others now, will they?" I explained before sipping some of the soup.

"That's- That shouldn't be the case..." She tried to defend herself, but it slowly made sense to her. She ate another spoonful as she frowned.

"You wouldn't be so naive to think that you're the most intelligent student on the campus, right? If a number of Class A students, who are just as smart and capable, can work effectively with others, there's no doubt that they would be chosen over you." With that, I grabbed the cup with both of my hands and consumed the remaining soup.

Thanks for the meal.

Around that time, Horikita also finished her meal.

"Is that really the case...?" She still seemed to deny what I said. Well, I don't have any evidence for my claim. She's free to believe them or not.

"Are you against the idea of making friends?" I got up, putting away my mess in the sink.

"Frankly, yes. As I said, I prefer to be alone," she replied instantly.

"But you do want to advance to Class A, right?" I asked, looking her directly in the eyes.

"Of course. Now that I have some knowledge about this school's true nature, that will be my main goal," answered Horikita.

Sigh... As she is now, Horikita's nothing but a double-edged sword.

"I see." I crossed my arms before continuing. "Then forgive me for my harsh words, but I think you might want to refrain from acting stuck-up, lest you become a liability to the class."

At this point, she needed to hear it. In the future, I don't want to work extra by stopping unnecessary, childish arguments driven by pride.

"T-That's... I'll think about it... As you said earlier, the solidarity of the class will be the most important thing in this school..." She really seemed to take my words seriously.

That's a good thing. Horikita should be an academically competent student. That's what her confidence in her entrance exam results tells me. If that confidence isn't unfounded, then she might become a useful person for Class D's advancement in the future.



More importantly, Horikita didn't bark back at me even as I said some provocative things. It goes to show how she doesn't see me as someone below her.

After an awkward moment of silence, I decided to ask Horikita if she had any more questions for me.

"Anything else?" Given her tense reaction, I might have sounded a little bit too sudden. Horikita was still thinking about what I just said.

"Do you really plan on advancing to Class A?" Horikita asked hesitantly.

"Haven't I made that clear already?" I answered back with a question while tilting my head.

"You questioned me before I could ask why you slacked off on your exam. What was your reason for that?"

I'm impressed by her perception, but unfortunately, I don't want to talk about my past.

I came to this school to start again-- No... In this school, I can begin entirely anew. I wouldn't let my origins get in the way of my high school life.

"I'm not obliged to answer that, am I?" I narrowed my eyes a little bit.

Given her sharpness, making up a lie would be too risky. However, telling her some truths about me would yield the same risk.

"Isn't that a bit hypocritical? I thought you prioritized the class's solidarity. How can we trust you if you're keeping secrets?" asked Horikita.

"Then, are you alright with laying everything bare to me? What are your true objectives? Why do you want to advance to Class A? What motivates you? Will you tell me everything about your past?"

"That's not necessary now, is it?" Horikita bit her lip.

"Exactly. I'm not looking for a friendly relationship with the class here. I'll help them advance, but that doesn't mean they need to know everything about me. And besides, we've just met today. Why don't we get to know each other a little better first before sharing personal stuff?" I said.

To be honest, that was a half-lie. I wanted some friends, but focusing on that would be a bad move. I'll take my time in exploring that area.

Horikita only stared at me with a curious glare. Another brief moment of silence ensued. This time, Horikita was the one who broke the ice.

"Sigh... I suppose I'll go now. This has been a fruitful conversation, Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita didn't sound sarcastic at



all. That's a relief.

"Alright. See you tomorrow." With that, Horikita walked out of my room and left.

When I finished cleaning after myself, I surrendered my body to the bed.

"What a day..." I muttered.

I like this school. I chose it for one fundamental reason. People were not allowed to contact students without permission, even if they were friends or immediate family. I greatly appreciated that.

I was free. Isn't freedom simply the best? I almost didn't want to graduate. For me, passing or failing didn't really matter. I simply wanted to test myself.

At first, I was just thinking about taking the backseat, not drawing attention to myself. However, this school turned out to be pretty interesting.

I wonder how far I can reach while utilizing the abilities given to me by *"that man"*.

My body felt far from tired, and excitement still overwhelms my mind. This new life of mine... I'll enjoy it to the fullest.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*You probably have noticed, but the first day of school is really dragged out on this one. Kiyotaka is extremely active, whether it's intentional or not. And the initial interactions between him and the key characters are really important in establishing the groundwork for future chapters... So yeah.*

*In the light novel, Kiyotaka stated that his room was about 8-tatami mats wide. As someone from the White Room, I thought I'd have him measure his room with actual units this time around.*

*Kiyotaka wouldn't wait until the Island Exam to shape up Suzune. He ought to fix this double-edged sword as soon as possible.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 3.1 - Start with the Most Troublesome

The second day of school came. I entered the room and found my classmates acting like how they did on the first day. When Hirata saw my humble figure, he immediately greeted me.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun." Hirata waved his hand.

"Good morning!" Some of the girls who were talking to Hirata greeted me too.

"Good morning," I replied.

I noticed that almost everyone looked at me when I arrived. From their perspective, I'm probably on Hirata's level in the social hierarchy so they can't openly talk to me without feeling pretentious. I need to do something about that.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're here! Good morning!" Kushida ran up to me excitedly.

I sure am a lucky man, having such an angelic girl as a friend.

--?!

I sensed killing intent... Well, I did, but it's just from my male classmates, who clearly want to score on Kushida.

"Good morning, Kushida. What's up?" I said.

"Oh, nothing... Well, uh- I was wondering if you'll talk to the whole class later. As you can probably guess, I think most of us are still not a hundred percent clear with the situation..." Amazing. Kushida's goal was probably just to greet me. However, she immediately thought of something so as to not make the atmosphere awkward.

"I will. Don't worry. But for that, I'll need your help along with Hirata. I can't possibly keep the whole class intact without you two." I reassured her.

"Leave it to us!" Kushida nodded with a smile.

She waved her hand while scooting back to her friends.

"Good morning, Horikita." I greeted my seatmate without looking at her.

"Good morning." Horikita did the same as she kept her eyes on the book she was reading.

As much as I wanted to stay seated while looking outside the window, I should probably work on getting to know my other male



classmates. I stood up, much to Horikita's indifference. I walked towards Sudou's seat when I noticed that the owner has arrived.

"Sup', Sudou." I tried to act casually.

From the way Sudou acted yesterday, I think it would be a bad idea to be as formal and amicable as Hirata.

"Oh, Ayanokouji, what's up?" Sudou looked with a slightly surprised expression.

"Yesterday was something, wasn't it?"

Having only talked to him once, I can't possibly think of anything else other than the events yesterday. However, that's fine. After all, me talking to Sudou is just one part of my plan.

"Oh, yeah... Those upperclassmen were a bunch of assholes, weren't they?" Sudou clicked his tongue upon recalling those memories.

"Based on what they said, I guess we can really believe what Chabashira-sensei told us yesterday."

"Yeah... Class D... and class points, huh?" Sudou felt quite unsettled.

"Hey, Sudou!" Three guys approached us.

"Oh, Ike, what's up?" greeted Sudou.

Finally.

With Sudou as the middleman, these three will try to get to know me. That's probably what they're thinking. That's fine. After all, my plan was exactly just that.

"Ayanokouji? You're buddies with Sudou?" Ike asked.

"Yeah, why?" I admitted.

"Yeah, right. I'm friends with Ayanokouji. You got a problem with that?" Sudou added with a proud tone.

"Huh? Why would I?" says Ike. He then extends his hand to me. "I'm Ike, Ike Kanji. Nice to meet ya', Ayanokouji."

"Nice to meet you, Ike," I replied, shaking his hand.

"I'm Yamauchi Haruki. You can always come to me for love advice!" Yamauchi proudly slapped his torso.

"I'm Hondou Ryoutarou. Nice to meet you," said Hondou.

"Nice to meet you, guys. So you're also friends with Sudou?" I nodded.

So far so good...

"Pretty much. Almost everyone was avoiding him due to his scary face, but I, for one, am kind-hearted enough to realize that he's not a bad guy." Ike's flamboyant expression ticked Sudou off.

"Hey!" Sudou yelled.

"Well, Sudou's has a really short fuse. He would almost always get into situations where he'd pick a fight when we were wandering around Keyaki Mall yesterday," said Hondou.



"Good thing I'm strong enough to stop him!" Yamauchi flexed his biceps before slapping them.

"Keyaki Mall, huh...? It's unfortunate that I never got the chance to go there yesterday. It was quite the depressing first day of school for me." I muttered with a sigh.

Saying this should show them that I'm just a normal guy with normal social needs. Their preconceived notion of me as an unapproachable social elite should disappear instantly. Once that happens, they should start acting buddy-buddy with me.

"Well, well, Sudou aside..." grinned Yamauchi.

"Yeah, yeah... Say, Ayanokouji. What's up with you Kushida-chan?" Ike whispered, wrapping his arms around my shoulder.

That was fast.

"What's up with us?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"Are you two dating?" Hondou questioned me straight.

"Oh, even I'm curious about that," added Sudou.

Somehow, I knew it would come to this. I can capitalize on their interest to get closer.

"Ah, no. We're just friends." Since I'm not that used to socializing with others, I can't possibly know what's the best response here. That's why I opted for a safe option; telling the truth.

"Really? You're not lying, aren't you?" Ike put on a skeptical expression.

"Traitors will not be tolerated, Ayanokouji!" Yamauchi closed his fist in retaliation.

The way they're acting is really familiar...

Oh, I remember now. When I was researching high school norms in media like manga, I've encountered students acting like these three. They were background characters most of the time though.

"I'm simply telling you the truth. Besides, it's just the second day of school. There's no need to rush these things," I said.

"W-Wha-?! So you're saying that you have plans?" Yamauchi and Ike were shocked by my words.

"So you do have a crush on Kushida-chan." Hondou nudged me with his elbow.

Seems like my statement has been severely misunderstood.

"Kushida is attractive. She'll surely be one of the most popular if not the most popular girl in our year, so I can understand where you guys are coming from. But as unbelievable as it sounds, I don't see her that way," I explained.

"Isn't that just an elaborate excuse? There's no way we can just simply believe that." Now Yamauchi was the one who nudged me with his elbow.

"Don't hound Ayanokouji now. You see, I'm kind of the same. I



won't actively go after her, like you two idiots, but if she's the one who gets close to me, then I'd happily oblige. Am I right, Ayanokouji?" Hondou explained haughtily.

I nodded.

Of course, I wanted a girlfriend like any high school guy.

"The hell'd you say, Hondou?! There's no way Kushida-chan would try to get close to you!" barked Ike.

"And you're just as much of an idiot as us!" followed Yamauchi.

"Don't lump me with you guys! If I hadn't done anything, you two would have bought that PS Vita and your precious points would've been down the drain!" countered Hondou.

"Shut up! You were also drooling in excitement when we went window shopping yesterday!" Ike bit back.

The three of them started arguing in a comedic fashion. It was quite the sight in an early morning.

"They sure are lively," I commented.

"The hell? They're just a noisy bunch that needs to shut up. And that's such an old man's line, Ayanokouji," replied Sudou.

"Is it?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

Not long after, the first bell rang. All of us quickly went back to our seats, right before Chabashira-sensei waltzes inside the classroom.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 3.2 - Self-Introduction

"Good morning, everyone," greeted Chabashira-sensei, with her usual poker face.

Standing behind the podium, Chabashira-sensei scanned the entire class.

"Hehhh... Look at you, sitting up straight with such serious expressions. You're already acting like students befitting of Class A." Chabashira-sensei was praising us, but her sarcastic tone made it all clear that we were actually being mocked.

"The higher-ups were really shocked when I reported what happened yesterday, you know? If any of the other class advisers find out about you guys, they would surely become wary." Chabashira-sensei's tone suddenly dropped. "I'm also under investigation right now. As you can see, there's always the possibility that I willingly shared that information with you guys. Such actions are strictly against the rules and could get me fired on the spot. However, once they go through all of the evidence, I'm sure we'll be fine."

Evidence, huh? I'm guessing it's the security cameras that are scattered around the classroom walls. They're not especially hidden, but I don't think everyone's noticed them yet.

"Sensei." Hirata raised his hand.

"Yes, Hirata?" Chabashira-sensei gave him a side glance.

"Is it alright for you to tell us these things?" asked Hirata.

"Of course. I wouldn't make the careless mistake of sharing confidential information, even if it's for my own class's benefit. At the end of the day, rules are rules." Chabashira-sensei answered smoothly.

"Well, with that being said, I have another thing to clear up." With her hands plastered on the podium, Chabashira-sensei looked like quite an authoritative figure. "There was one detail about the S-System that I left out yesterday... No, it's more appropriate to say that I completely lied about it."

The stiff look on my classmates' faces turned stiffer.

"There's actually another way to earn class points apart from special exams." Chabashira-sensei said.

"-?!" The entire class reacted a bit violently, but they didn't utter any words. It only took a second before they calmed down again.



"What's with those looks? The special exams are already the icing on the cake. This one's nothing revolutionary or unique, really." Chabashira-sensei commented with a smirk. "Like any normal high school, we will be having midterms and final exams. Depending on your performance, you can earn up to 100 class points."

"That's quite a lot..." Some of my classmates murmured.

"Don't get too happy now. If you score high on your test, that's all fine and dandy, but should any of you fail... then that student will immediately be expelled." Chabashira-sensei didn't smile this time.

Does that mean she's actually concerned about us getting expelled? But wasn't she mocking us just a little while ago? I can't understand her at all...

"Expelled?!" With a bombshell of that level, my classmates finally exploded.

"T-That's ridiculous!" Yamauchi and his friends were the ones making the loudest ruckus.

"What's there to panic about? Remember that this is only your second day in school. The teachers that will follow me after homeroom will only give you the course outlines for their subjects. It's not like you've missed entire lessons already, right? If, say, Ayanokouji didn't buy the information on the S-System, then I'm sure that the especially undisciplined defects in this class will neglect their academic duties and slack off. If that were the case, panicking will be completely justified. Stop acting like children when you already have an overwhelming advantage," Chabashira-sensei elaborated.

That explanation calmed most of them down. If they listen to class discussions from the very start, getting high scores in the exams wouldn't be too hard with a little studying.

"That's all for now. I'll be back later for our Japanese History class. Since it almost took me a whole period to explain the S-System yesterday, I suppose I'll give you some time to mingle with each other. Goodbye." Chabashira-sensei, carrying her usual clipboard, walked out of the classroom and left us to our own devices.

Not long after, Hirata stood up. I envy him for having no hesitation in doing such a thing.

"Everyone, can I have your attention for a bit?" called Hirata. "Before we discuss anything regarding the S-System, is it alright if we heed Chabashira-sensei's suggestion? I really would like to get to know everyone."

He probably looked like a hero, especially to those who can't express themselves well.

I've already memorized all thirty-nine of my classmates' names



and faces. After subtly checking every name on each seat, all I had to do was wait for the owners to arrive and match the faces.

"Why not~?!" said Karuizawa.

"I'm in!" followed Shinohara.

Almost everyone agreed to the idea. I looked towards the left-most side of the room only to see Sudou's uninterested look. Meanwhile, my neighbor, Horikita, also seemed like she couldn't care less.

Just like how I anticipated it. It's a good thing that I sent a text to Hirata and Kushida in advance.

"Then, I'll go first. My name's Hirata Yousuke. Back in junior high, a lot of people called me Yousuke, so feel free to use my first name. I guess my hobby is sports in general, but I especially like soccer. I'm planning on playing soccer here, too. Nice to meet you, everyone," said Hirata.

With that effortless self-introduction, Hirata's popularity must've increased by two or four times within the class.

"Well then, I'd like everyone to introduce themselves, starting from the front. Is that okay?" asked Hirata.

After that, my classmates introduced themselves one by one. This may not be the best method to look for actual information about them, but it gave me a good glimpse of their personalities.

"I think it's my turn now," Kushida said timidly.

Everyone cheered. That adorable appearance charmed half of the class's boys. Even my heart started to race.

Kushida stood up, faced everyone, then opened her mouth.

"My name is Kushida Kikyou. None of my friends from junior high made it to this school, so I'm alone here. I'd like to get to know all of your names and faces right away and become friends as soon as possible!" said Kushida.

While most of the students had only said a few words of introduction, Kushida continued to talk.

"My first goal is to become friends with everyone. So, after we're finished with introductions, I'd love for you to share your contact information with me!" She continued with a big smile on her face.

"So, after school or during vacations, I want to make all sorts of memories with a lot of people. Please feel free to invite me to lots and lots of events! Anyway, I've talked for a long time, so I'll end my introduction here." Kushida finished off with her angelic aura emanating across the room.

The way she said her last sentence felt like she knew I was critiquing everyone's introductions. It made me feel slightly uncomfortable.

After everyone's applause came to a halt, the introductions



continued. A short while passed by and it was finally his turn.

"Excuse me, can you introduce yourself?" Hirata addressed the boy in the center seat of the room.

It was Kouenji.

"Hmph, fine." He smirked like an aristocrat, displaying his impudent attitude.

Kouenji didn't stand up. He merely shifted his crossed legs before introducing himself.

"My name is Kouenji Rokusuke. As the sole male heir to the Kouenji conglomerate group, I will soon be tasked with carrying Japan into the future. I sincerely look forward to making your acquaintance, ladies." He aimed his introduction solely at the opposite sex, rather than the entire class.

While some of them admired his wealth, a lot regarded him as nothing but a weirdo.

"Starting today, I will mercilessly punish anyone who makes me uncomfortable. Please exercise proper precaution so that you may avoid that." Kouenji finished with a proud grin.

"Um, Kouenji-kun. What exactly do you mean when you say '*anyone who makes me uncomfortable*'?" asked Hirata, who looked uneasy at the word "punish".

"I meant exactly what I said. If asked to give an example, well... I would say I hate ugly things, for instance. So, if I saw something ugly, I would do just as I said," replied Kouenji, flipping his long flowing bangs with a fwish!

He sure left an impression.

Well, half of the class still needs to go. We should move forward. That's probably what everyone was thinking.

After more introductions from my other classmates, it was finally my turn...

"Ayanokouji-kun, go for it!" cheered Kushida.

A lot of the girls seemed rather interested, which surprised me to some degree. I've simulated this situation inside my mind a couple of million times already. 99.999% of those simulations ended in absolute disaster. But then again, the remaining 0.001% is just wishful thinking on my part. It's practically a guaranteed catastrophe.

Whatever... I can't really do anything at this point, can I? I stood upon and faced my classmates.

"My name is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I hope you haven't forgotten my name yet." I introduced myself in a joke-like manner.

Everyone simply stared at me...

Crap... As I thought, it was a blunder. None of my classmates laughed. I just want to die in a hole right now...



"There's no way we'll forget your name, Ayanokouji-kun. You're already dubbed as Class D's savior." Hirata broke the painful silence.

I'm grateful... Thank you, Hirata. But why did they take my words seriously? It was supposed to be a joke. It was my tone, wasn't it? Sigh... This is one of those moments where I wished my natural tone was that of someone like Ike.

But this is a do-or-die situation. If I retreat with a boring backup plan, it won't end well for me.

"You're my friend, Hirata. It would make me cry if even you forgot my name," I tried to crack a joke once more-- this time, with a vibrant and goofy ring to it.

"Isn't that cruel, Hirata?!" Yamauchi protested with a comedic expression.

I forcefully improved my tone. It certainly sounded dynamic enough. Yamauchi, who probably got my joke, followed up.

"Hahaha! What the heck?" Satou laughed along with some other girls.

"T-That won't happen, I swear!" Hirata responded in a panic.

It caused a chain reaction which made the majority of my classmates laugh out loud.

"I was kidding." I shot back with my usual monotone while segueing towards the rest of my self-introduction. "I liked to read books when I was a kid. And while I've never played any sport, I think I'm pretty okay when it comes to running. I'm looking forward to getting to know you all."

It was a mandatory move to say something about myself. Given my demeanor, I'd say that those two things are common enough to be considered as the safest option.

"You dodged a bullet," Horikita commented as I sat.

"More like a natural disaster..." I replied before hurling her comment back at her. "It's your turn now, Horikita. You won't be forced to do anything, but I recommend you take this chance."

I probably sounded like someone encouraging his friend, but underneath my monotonous, boring tone... was a threat. If Horikita can sense it, she could either obey or disobey.

The cold sweat forming on Horikita's silky white face indicated that she did... Horikita looked very angry, glaring at me like a mother bear inside its hibernation nest, and I was an intruder.

"Fine... But remember, you owe me this moment, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll collect my debt later." Horikita said, filled with indignation.

Once again, Horikita didn't disappoint me. She didn't obey nor disobey. She disregarded the whole threat and made it a deal instead. With that, Horikita Suzune stood up to introduce herself in front of the class.



*Author's Notes:*

*If you can remember from the anime, Class D's reaction we're around the likes of "Only 100?" and "That's better than nothing, right?" because they literally saw their 0 points in comparison to Class A's 940 points. Well, due to the past events in this timeline, it's only natural for their perspective on points to differ so much.*

*Kushida and Kouenji's introductions were basically the same as the ones in the light novel.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 3.3 - Class D's Foundation

Horikita was beautiful. Even if she didn't socialize during the first day, her appearance alone garnered quite the attention. It was even more so when she got involved in the conversation with me during the *'information purchase'* yesterday. That's why the anticipation of the whole class was understandable.

"I'm Horikita Suzune. Nice to meet you." As cold as ice and as cool as a zephyr, Horikita ended her introduction with two short sentences.

Our classmates were nothing short of confused. After making eye contact with him...

"Alright, let's proceed..." Hirata continued facilitating the introduction.

"You really sent that home, didn't you?" I commented.

"I did what you want. You'll pay for this later." Horikita replied with a terrifying glower.

And now I'm the one who's getting threatened... explicitly. I expected her to loathe events like these, but I didn't think she'd detest them that much. Well, her anger is reasonable. I'll just explain myself later.

It wasn't long until all thirty-nine of us finished our introductions. With Kushida and Hirata taking the lead, everything panned out seamlessly. After the hard-fought self-introduction of Sakura, it was finally time to move on. Now, the last person to introduce himself was none other than Sudou Ken.

"Sudou, it's your turn now," I called with a bit of volume.

"Hah? Why should I? I'm not a child anymore," grumbled Sudou.

Of course, the class wouldn't know how to react if he says things like this.

"Ah, well. There's really no harm in telling us anything about yourself, right? As your friend, I'm really interested in your hobbies. First of all, you're really tall. And even I can tell that your body is well-built. I'm sure everyone in the class is curious," I answered.

"What? Leave me alone..." Sudou was a bit surprised and shaken. However, the previous anger on his face was slowly disappearing. Good. It's your turn.

"That's right, Sudou-kun. I've always wondered if you played any sport. Do you mind telling us what you do for fun?" Kushida asked



with her all-too-powerful angelic smile.

"Your hair looks slick too, by the way," Onodera added, pointing a finger on the side of her hair.

A bunch of girls on Kushida's friend group murmured as if they were interested in what Sudou had to say. Sudou was probably not used to positive attention. Without a doubt, he would feel good about this.

"Hnnng-! How is Sudou getting attention from all the girls?!" protested Ike.

"You lucky bastard!" Yamauchi tagged along, as usual.

Ike and Yamauchi's disgruntled noises were blessings in disguise. They would only serve to boost Sudou's ego more.

"W-Well... If all of you really insist, then fine..." Sudou finally cracked.

"You can do it!" Kushida continued to cheer along with her friends.

"My name is Sudou Ken. I've played basketball since elementary school and I'm planning to continue playing here. Nice to meet you." Sudou said with a slightly flustered expression on his face.

"Ohh... Basketball, huh?" Okitani murmured.

"We have a soccer star, and now a basketball star?" commented Mori.

"Is Class D actually a powerhouse?" Karuizawa did the same.

Sudou awkwardly scratched his head while sitting down.

Seems like it went well. It would've been bad if Sudou became an object of hate this early on. He will, without a doubt, distance himself from the entire class if that happens. However, this is just a temporary fix. The problem here is Sudou's nature itself. Unless he fixes it, troubles like his dispute with the upperclassmen yesterday will happen again. Things will become especially dangerous once his behavior affects the class.

"Well, we sure took our time, didn't we? Thank you for participating, everyone. I'm glad that we got to know each other, even if it's just a little bit. We'll be together for the next three years, so I hope we can all get along," declared Hirata.

"Yeah!"

"Agreed!" Most of my classmates celebrated.

That was too close. The atmosphere wouldn't have been this lively if Horikita and Sudou refused to introduce themselves.

Chabashira-sensei's announcements and reminders took five minutes while our introductions took forty-five minutes. We have ten minutes left before the next teacher arrives.

"Once again, I'd like Ayanokouji-kun to take center stage. If any of you have questions regarding the S-System, we will try to answer



as much as we can." Hirata, who acted as an emcee, set the stage for me, the speaker.

I stood up and walked towards the podium. Being able to establish this kind of relationship with the current Class D is an enormous advantage. Given how rowdy and boisterous they seemed on the first day, no one would care about me standing here right now. They're all teenagers, after all. However, it seems like they also realize that their futures are on the line. That's a good start for shaping up my classmates into helpful and useful allies.

Resembling Chabashira-sensei's figure from earlier, I started laying out some of my thoughts.

"I'm sure all of you are aware of this already, but I want you to remember that our advantage will only last for a month. In the coming 1st of May, class points will be revealed to the other classes, officially starting the interclass race for points." That was probably a good starting point.

"As I have mentioned yesterday, the class's solidarity is important. However, before we help each other, we need to help ourselves first. I'm sure all of you are aware of your own capabilities. If we were to believe what Chabashira-sensei said about the class' sorting, then we will be the worst class in our year," I said, noticing the pained and dissatisfied expression of my classmates. "However, she also called us defects. In other words, we are flawed. If we look at it from the opposite perspective, our weaknesses are apparent, but we also have our own strengths."

Despite my dull and toneless way of talking, everyone was listening intently.

However, giving pep talks like this is still making me quite uncomfortable. If I didn't prepare a manuscript in my head, I wouldn't be able to speak this clearly.

It's not like I have a choice, though. If I talk in a logical and rational way, everyone would just think of me as a robot with little to no emotions. The relationships of Class D students must be cultivated first. Only by that time can I stop giving uncharacteristic speeches that would suit people like Hirata or Kushida more.

"Like the way I used it yesterday, it seems like points have a multitude of purposes. This is all just speculation, but I think that with the right amount of points, we can overturn something as bad as an expulsion," I said.

"What-?!"

"No way..."

"Isn't that awesome though?"

"That would surely be expensive." The class started murmuring.

"Once again, this is all just speculation. We can confirm



everything once we get to ask Chabashira-sensei next time. Going back to what I said about strengths, I think most, if not all of you are not satisfied with being placed in Class D. Is that right?" I asked.

With my vision on the entire room, I saw a lot of people nodding. However, I chose to ask Yukimura.

"Yukimura-kun, why do you think the school was wrong about placing you in Class D?" I questioned Yukimura's assessment of himself.

He stood smoothly and answered me right after fixing his glasses.

"First of all, I don't think I did badly on the entrance exam... No, I didn't just 'not do badly'. I am confident enough to say that I did excellently. Additionally, I am a hundred percent sure that my interview went well." Yukimura presented his argument like a valedictorian.

"Certainly. I wouldn't dare doubt you on that. However, do you remember what Chabashira-sensei said yesterday? 'This school evaluates its students' talents'. She didn't say anything that emphasizes our entrance exam results and academic abilities in particular," I rebutted.

"What? So you're saying that I really deserve to be in Class D?" Yukimura's expression turned unsavory.

My classmates started to become worried. Hirata and Kushida, who were on standby, got ready to take action.

"I wouldn't say that. At the end of the day, our places in Class D are just the subjective opinions of this school's higher-ups. Thank you for sharing your side, Yukimura-kun," I replied.

"I-I see..." Yukimura was at a loss for words. He probably didn't know what to feel about what I just told him.

"As you've all heard, each of us should have our own strengths. Take Yukimura-kun for example. His excellence in academics will surely be useful for our class," I continued. "On the other hand, let me ask Sudou from the back."

"What? Me?" Sudou raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Do you think you're as capable as Yukimura-kun when it comes to studying?" I asked.

"Hah? I don't care about studying. There's no way I'm as smart as him." Sudou was quite displeased with my question.

"But as you said earlier, you've been playing basketball since elementary. Your athleticism is clearly reflected in your appearance. So, when the time comes where the class needs someone with overwhelming athletic abilities, Sudou Ken will be Class D's top pick. Isn't that right? After all, this school has the unknown element called 'special exams'." I explained.

"I-I see... If that's the case, then..." Sudou replied nervously.



This induced some gasps of awe from my classmates.

"Those are some great insights, Ayanokouji-kun!" exclaimed one girl.

"He's so smart..." said another girl.

"You're so far into the future, Ayanokouji!" yelled Ike.

Apart from Horikita, who glared at me with skepticism, Kouenji, who continued combing his hair, and Sakura, who was too shy to make any noise, all of my classmates briefly cheered.

"Well then, since the time is almost up, I'll end this off by asking a few favors from all of you. First, please refrain from acting conceited or arrogant just because we have a slight advantage. Second, I hope we could continue following the basic school rules as to not decrease our points. And lastly, I want everyone to take studying seriously from now on. If any of you isn't confident in their ability to study, please ask help from capable people like Kushida, Hirata, Horikita, and Yukimura-kun," I said.

I didn't know how capable Kushida and Hirata were in studying. If I'm wrong, they'll probably correct me later and I'll have to apologize.

I finished off with a slight bow. And just like that, the second bell rang.

Really, I want to hand off these speech duties to someone else as soon as possible. That's what I honestly thought.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*I just wanted to clear up a few things about Horikita. You've noticed that she's not acting like the abrasive Horikita from the early volumes of the original light novel. However, she's exactly just that. If you make her converse with the three idiots, she'd immediately piss them off by talking down on them. However, she immediately witnessed Kiyotaka's capabilities early on. Hence, her current attitude towards him.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 4.1 - Subtle Movements

As expected, we spent the rest of the morning running through the course objectives in our respective subjects.

Starting tomorrow, homeroom will only last for five minutes. I can't talk to the whole class like I did this past two days...

As I was thinking about these things, lunch finally came.

"Ayanokouji-kun! Do you wanna eat lunch with us?" At first, I thought it would be Kushida and her friends. But, I heard a completely different set of voices.

When I turned my head, there were three girls who walked up to me. They were Satou Maya, Matsushita Chiaki, and Mori Nene.

It was common sense to confirm whether their invitation was really towards me, but that would put me on the receiving end of the conversation. Since my vision and hearing were healthy enough, I'll just assume that the invitation was for me.

"Sure, but can I invite someone?" I asked.

"Oh, of course," replied Satou.

I walked towards Sudou's chair.

"Hey, Sudou. Wanna come with me? I'll have lunch with Satou and her friends," I whispered.

Satou and the others were a bit surprised when they saw me invite Sudou.

During the first day, most of Class D avoided him due to his scary face. Fortunately, the self-introductions lessened their prejudice against him a bit.

"Hah? Why me?" The person in question, Sudou, was shocked too.

"Well, I'm not used to being around girls, especially when I'm the only guy. C'mon man, you're the only one I can ask," I pleaded.

"W-Well... If you really insist." Sudou shyly sneaked a glance towards Satou and the others.

As expected, Sudou was also interested in girls.

I was one step ahead of Ike (and his friends) in inviting Sudou because they spent some time chatting. As the five of us walked out of the door, they could only gasp in jealousy upon seeing Sudou and me with three cute girls.

"Oh, so it's Sudou-kun," Matsushita said.

"My bad if I'm intruding. It's just that Ayanokouji here can't help but be nervous when he's alone with girls." grinned Sudou.



"Wow. You didn't have to expose me that hard," I replied.

"Ahaha! Nervous? Ayanokouji looks anything but nervous. What are you saying?" asked Satou.

"I know, right? Ayanokouji-kun always has this calm aura around him," added Mori.

"Sudou, they're talking about me. Flex your muscles to grab their attention or something," I joked.

"Huh? Should I?" Sudou asked obliviously. He didn't get my joke.

The three chuckled in response.

"You two are funny. Are you friends from junior high?" Mori asked.

"Not really. How about you three?" And the conversation continued on.

It wasn't long until we reached the cafeteria and ate. I had to carefully navigate the conversation due to how volatile Sudou is, but I'm glad everything went fine. All three of them were pretty easy to talk with. We even got their contact info.

"Later, Ayanokouji-kun, Sudou-kun."

"Yep, it was fun."

The three waved at us. Sudou and I lightly bumped our fists without looking at each other.

Right after I sat down on my chair, music played through the speakers all around the campus. Then, a sweet voice was heard announcing something.

"At five PM Japan Standard Time today, we will be holding a student club fair in Gymnasium No. 1. Students interested in joining a club, please gather in Gymnasium No. 1. I repeat, at--"

Student club fair, huh? Should I join something?

"Hey, Horikita. Do you plan on joining a club?" I asked my seatmate who just finished eating her sandwich.

"I'm not interested in joining a club," she answered sternly.

"Well, to be honest, I'm the same. But, I still want to check it out. Are you free later?" I asked.

"Are you asking me to go with you?" Horikita's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, but it's fine if you have plans." Of course, I won't force her.

"No, I actually don't have any plans. However, I'm more concerned about you. You were invited by Satou-san and her friends earlier, right? There's a high chance for you to get invited again later. It doesn't even have to be them. Practically everyone in our class is interested in you like how they're interested in Hirata-kun or Kushida-san. It's not the same, but it's still similar," explained Horikita.

"I won't deny that possibility... But I can just decline their offer, right?" I replied.



"You'll... decline them?" Horikita was genuinely surprised. It's like the idea itself was ridiculous. I'm not a Yes-Man, you know?

"Yeah," I nodded.

"I see... Fine. We'll head to your dorm right after. I'll make you pay for what you've done to me earlier," she said.

I didn't do anything to you, though.

"Don't say anything that can be misunderstood. And what do you want, anyway?" I asked.

"Isn't that obvious? I want more information." Horikita said with quite some force behind her words.

"Hey, let me remind you, Horikita. I don't hold any credible information and all of the things I've said thus far were nothing but speculations and sloppy deductions," I shrugged.

"I know that much. I'm probably the only one who's skeptical about the things you spouted earlier. I'm still not a hundred percent convinced about being flawed. The main information that I'm looking for is your plan for Class D's future," Horikita said with a frown.

Well, at least she's somewhat convinced.

"Fine."

It's a done deal then. I'll show her something good while we're at it.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 4.2 - Brother

"Then, I'll go ahead near the place for the basketball club. See you tomorrow, if not later, Ayanokouji." Sudou waved at me.

The reception area will be opened a bit later, but I guess Sudou wanted to camp near them to register early.

"Yeah, sure. Good luck," I responded.

"Alright. You too, Horikita." Sudou waved at Horikita before turning around to run.

"Don't get into fights, Sudou-kun. Yo-" I swiftly put my hands in front of Horikita. When she looked at me in confusion, I just shook my head in response.

"I won't!" Sudou yelled without looking back.

"You're lucky Sudou was too excited for the basketball club. Your unwarranted comment would've pissed him off," I told her.

"I was just reminding him-"

"You didn't have to," I interrupted, looking into her eyes.

I didn't have to explain anything. Given how sharp she is, Horikita should get what my eyes were saying. "I know him more than you do.", "You don't get to tell him what to do either." I didn't know if my tone was harsh, but I felt like I didn't need to sugarcoat things too much when I'm with Horikita.

"I see... I'm sorry..." This was a first. I expected her to apologize with a defiant tone. But in stark contrast to my expectations, Horikita looked genuinely apologetic. Now I'm obligated to give her an explanation or else, I'll feel bad.

"I know more than anyone just how much Sudou can damage the class if he gets out of control. I'm doing everything I can to prevent any of that from happening. Don't say nor do anything unnecessary or you'll just get in my way," I scolded-- kind of.

"So the reason you're... Just who are you...?" Horikita muttered, perplexed.

Right now, Horikita probably concluded that I'm trying to "fix" Sudou under the guise of being friends. I really do want to make friends with him, you know?

I walked forward before talking once more. "Anyway, there are more people here than I expected."

Nearly all of the students assembled there were freshmen. There were about a hundred people waiting around. We stood near the



back of the room and waited for the fair to begin. While waiting, we glanced over the pamphlet that students received upon entering the gymnasium. The pamphlet contained detailed information about club activities.

"I wonder if this school has famous clubs. For example, something like karate," mused Horikita.

"As expected, every club seems to operate on a high level." I started scrutinizing the fair around us.

Of course, this school couldn't be a top-tier institution for every sport. I can see that clearly.

"The equipment here is luxurious, it puts professionals' stuff to shame. Oh, but it looks like they don't have a karate club, after all," says Horikita.

"Were you interested in karate, Horikita?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Not really. I just studied it a long time ago," replied Horikita.

The way she says that... Horikita's words were suited for someone who was actually excited about the karate club. The tone and content of her speech don't add up sometimes.

"Thank you all for waiting, first-year students. We will now begin the club fair. A representative from each club will explain their function. My name is Tachibana, the student council secretary, and the club fair's organizer. It's nice to meet you all," announced the petite third-year named Tachibana.

Representatives from each club quickly lined up on a stage. It was quite a diverse crowd. The club representative included everything from burly athletes in judo uniforms to students dressed in beautiful kimonos.

"What did you even want to check out in here, Ayanokouji-kun? Don't you think this is just a waste of time?" complained Horikita.

"You're probably right. This is just a show to get as many new members, anyway. Even I can feel the lack of passion, not from the ones on stage, but from the audience. And it looks like the club representatives couldn't care less as long as they succeed advertising," I replied.

"More members means more budget, which leads to better equipment. That's just the way it is," added Horikita.

"The so-called 'phantom members', huh?"

I turned to leave but Horikita remained in place.

"Horikita?" It was as if she couldn't hear me at all. She kept staring intensely at the stage.

At first, I thought she was focused on the baseball club's speech, but they were just the same as the others. And then, I realized whom Horikita was looking at after her gaze remained unchanged as the representatives of the baseball club walked off-stage.



A slender person with sleek black hair stood in front of the microphone. Wearing his glasses, he stared at the crowd with a seemingly piercing and calculating gaze. He calmly scanned the venue and looked at the first-year students. To everyone's surprise, he didn't start talking after doing so.

The voices of the audience started to grow. Some of them even made fun of him. The crowd laughed, but the student wasn't fazed at all. Then, the laughter died. He continued staring at the spectators with an apathetic expression that resembled someone. Meanwhile, Horikita's fervent gaze didn't change for even a second.

After thirty seconds or so, he finally spoke.

"I'm the student council president. My name is Horikita Manabu," he said.

Ah. Now things make a lot of sense.

"The student council is looking to recruit potential candidates among the first-year students to replace the graduating third years. Although no special qualifications are required for candidacy, we humbly ask that those considering applications not be involved in other club activities. We generally do not accept students involved elsewhere." His tone was soft, but the atmosphere he created was too thick and heavy.

Consistent silence conquered the entire gymnasium.

"Furthermore, we in the student council do not wish to appoint anyone who possesses a naive outlook. Not only would such a person not be elected, but he or she would also sully the sanctity of this school. It is the student council's right and duty to enforce and amend the rules, but the school expects more than that. We gladly welcome those of you who understand this," he continued.

Horikita Manabu's speech was very eloquent. He finished his piece without stopping or stuttering. One can clearly get the impression that he is the one who's at the top of this school.

But, I wonder if I should run for the student council. My goal is to utilize my abilities, but I don't have anything concrete in mind other than reaching Class A. Hmm, I should think about this.

"Thank you all for coming. The club fair has ended. We will now open the reception area to anyone interested in signing up. Also, registration will be open until the end of April, so if any student wishes to join at a later date, we ask that you please bring the application form directly to the club you wish to join." Thanks to Tachibana's laid-back tone, the tension in the air dissipated immediately.

"....." Horikita, however, wasn't budging in the least.

"Do you want to talk to him?" I asked.

"What?" Oh, she finally responded.



"Correct me if I'm wrong but... Horikita Manabu is your brother, right?" It would be embarrassing if I turned out to be wrong, though.

"Y-Yeah... He is..." Her tone was as strong as ever, but the volume and flow were lacking.

"Well, why don't you chase after him? Do you want me to come with you, or should I just wait here?" I suggested some options.

To be honest, I'm kind of curious about the student council president himself.

"No... I think... I'll just find him next time. He must be busy as the student council president," Horikita replied, averting her eyes.

That might be the case.

I wonder what their relationship is like, though. With the way her brother delivered himself, surely, he isn't fond of Horikita's placement in Class D.

"Alright, come with me then. We'll head to the teachers' faculty," I said, to which Horikita nodded in response.

Since she didn't ask why nor object to the idea, she might have some personal business there as well.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 4.3 - Uncovering

"Excuse me." I knocked before opening the door. "Is Chabashira-sensei in here?"

No, I can't see her anywhere.

"Ara? Who's this, who's this? Oh, there are two of you. Are you Sae-chan's students? Oh, dear me. Where are my manners? I'm Hoshinomiya Chie, in charge of Class B." The teacher who responded to us had wavy, shoulder-length hair that made her appear very mature. On the contrary, however, she was extremely talkative and gives the impression of a happy-go-lucky person.

Horikita noticed that I'm not having the best time dealing with her and decided to take the reins.

"Hoshinomiya-sensei, my name is Horikita Suzune, and this is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun. Both of us are from Chabashira-sensei's class, Class D. Do you know where she is? If you do, can you please tell us? We happen to have some questions about clubs and stuff." Horikita was perfect for the job. She didn't cut any corners in asking what we want.

"Oh, I see. Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun, huh? Well, Sae-chan's most likely on her favorite smoking spot; the rooftop. It should be closed for students around this hour, but..." Hoshinomiya-sensei leaned closer to us. "I think you'll be fine if you have Sae-chan with you up there."

Horikita and I nodded to each other.

"If that's the case, then we'll go ahead now. Thank you very much, Hoshinomiya-sensei." Horikita and I bowed.

"Take care now. Tell Sae-chan I said hi!" she said towards our fading figure.

It was currently around six in the evening. When we arrived at the rooftop, we saw Chabashira-sensei's figure gazing towards the lit-up streets around the school building. She didn't stop smoking even as we got closer.

"What are you two doing here? It's way past school hours, you know?" Chabashira-sensei asked as we opened the door, which didn't produce even the slightest of sounds.

Chabashira-sensei didn't seem particularly surprised to see Horikita and me, giving the two of us nothing but a side glance.

"I just wanted to clear up a few things, Sensei," I started. "When



you said 'As expected' yesterday, what did you mean by it? Do you know anything about me?"

"Heh...? You're asking me with Horikita on your side? Are you fine with that, Ayanokouji?" smirked Chabashira-sensei.

"I'm confident that you don't know anything important, that's why I'm fine with Horikita listening right now. I just wanted to know what you know," I said.

"Hahaha! Truly a bizarre kid! Very well, Ayanokouji. I shouldn't make this hard for you since it's something personal. You're right. I don't know anything important. The only reason why I kept my eye on you from the start was that Chairman Sakayanagi asked me to 'take care of you'." Chabashira-sensei answered in a heartbeat.

"Are you sure you can just drop names like that?" I asked.

"Oh, sure, why not? I'm fairly certain that he'll try to meet you soon, anyway," replied Chabashira-sensei. "So? Anything else?"

Chairman Sakayanagi, huh?

"I've seen a lot of students in the club fair earlier. Are you sure you're not keeping something important from us, Sensei?" I continued.

"You noticed that, too? Hm, alright. All of the other classes were indeed informed apart from you guys. Anyone who joins the club may have the chance to gain benefits-- specifically private points-- if they do well." Chabashira-sensei responded with a grin.

"Wouldn't it be better for Class D students to know that? I think having more sources of income apart from class points is a good thing in general," asked Horikita.

"Knowing your class, I'd advise you to let them continue their ignorance on the matter. What use would they be for the club if they go in with nothing but private points in mind?" answered Chabashira-sensei.

"That's just the second purpose, isn't it, Sensei? After all, you even stressed the words; 'if they do well'. Horikita, imagine if one of our classmates join a club just for points. If he or she doesn't take it seriously, what would they do if there are repercussions? For example; if they quit or get removed before a certain amount of time inside the club, their private points, or worse, their class points, may take a hit," I elaborated.

"I see. It only makes sense since you get rewarded if you do well. The Concept of Reward and Punishment, huh?" Horikita says while thinking to herself.

I can see Chabashira-sensei smiling at our conversation.

"Another thing, Sensei. I'm curious about the investigation on you, and why you were so confident." I pressed on.

"Oh? Now we're going there? Very well." Chabashira-sensei's



smile didn't waver.

"The security cameras wouldn't really help in the investigation, wouldn't it? At the end of the day, visual evidence is useless because they can't hear us. Security cameras with built-in microphones and hidden audio bugs for teachers or students are still forbidden by the law. The former may have been an option if this was a private school, but unfortunately, it isn't." I continued talking with Horikita and Chabashira-sensei's gazes focused on me. "If I were to make a guess, I'd think that they would have no choice but to check on your past records. Well, it's a given that they've already done that before hiring you here, but double-checking, triple-checking, or even digging deeper is still a necessity."

"Don't beat around the bush Ayanokouji. Horikita's getting restless, you know?" Chabashira-sensei teased.

"I'm saying that if your records are clean, then it all comes down to your motives. At first, you acted incredibly indifferent and distant towards Class D, but the moment I acted to save them, the word 'excitement' was written all over your face," I answered. "You even went so far as to lie about the midterms and final exams just to have the 'I didn't even tell them everything' alibi. But of course, it didn't help you, did it? After all, you already told us about the 'special exams'. Those might have been the main reason why they started this investigation in the first place."

"I told you before, right? No one has ever done what you've done. Of course, they'd conduct an investigation--"

"I won't buy it, Sensei. Sure, the novelty argument is strong, but the school had this system for a long time now. There's no way it can be caught off-guard by a random student buying out the information from a teacher. I'm still inclined to think it's the special exams you told us about yesterday. Preparing for that months before it can actually happen is too much of an advantage." Sensei's expression was a bit dark, but her smile was still noticeable. "So, Sensei, please correct me if I'm wrong."

"Sigh... You really are different, Ayanokouji. Fine, you win. You're right on all fronts. Really now, you didn't even have much information to work with, but you still managed to deduce everything this far." Chabashira-sensei knows that I'm wasn't done, so she asks. "But Ayanokouji, what's your point? What's the deal with this exposé fiasco?"

"I just wanted to ask one simple question from you, Sensei. Horikita, based on what you've heard, what do you think is my question?" I turned to Horikita, who was carefully digesting everything.

"I'm not sure... However, if my guess is correct, it should be; "Do



you want us to overtake Class A?", right?" Horikita asks for my confirmation.

"You're a bit off, Horikita." I stopped to look at Chabashira-sensei before continuing.

"It's *"Just how obsessed are you with Class A?"*, right, Chabashira Sae-sensei?"



## Vol. 1: Chapter 4.4 - Abilities

"Obsessed?" Horikita became slightly confused.

"Chabashira-sensei told us about the special exams, which wasn't supposed to be mentioned when we paid for her information. Her current attitude towards the class isn't easy to read due to her frequent mockings, but her indifference is completely gone. And lastly, Chabashira-sensei is being awfully cooperative with us. Too cooperative, even," I said. "I suppose the decisive piece of evidence I need will be from Chairman Sakayanagi's mouth, but I don't have it right now. I'm only around 75% sure about this."

"You think you've figured everything out, Ayanokouji?" Chabashira-sensei asked with a smirk.

"I'm not that conceited, Sensei. If I said anything wrong, then again, please correct me," I asked, closing my eyes.

Horikita was looking back and forth between Sensei and me at a slow pace.

"What do you think, Horikita? Do you believe in everything that Ayanokouji has said thus far?" Chabashira-sensei turned her attention to Horikita.

"I honestly can't tell. Ayanokouji-kun's arguments are shaky at best. As he said, there is no decisive evidence. However, you, yourself, are suspicious, Sensei," replied Horikita.

"Oh, please. You don't have to try so hard in acting skeptical. It's fine to act impressed when it comes to Ayanokouji. After all, he's completely right. I want Class A. I want you guys to become Class A," admitted Chabashira-sensei.

"Do you understand, Horikita? I don't know how long Chabashira-sensei has been teaching in this school, but it's clear that the past Class Ds she's handled before were all subpar. This year is different, however. There may be a lot of defectives, but we still have wildcards like you, Hirata, Sudou, and Kushida. There are also unknowns like Kouenji. In short, we have a chance to rise on the ranks," I explained.

"I can understand that students who graduate in Class A will have bright futures, but what's in it for the teachers? Are there special rewards?" asked Horikita.

"You're exactly right, Horikita. Teachers are also evaluated by the performance of their Class during graduation. And of course, the



better classes' homeroom advisers will be rewarded accordingly--" I interrupted her.

"That doesn't matter. I don't think Chabashira-sensei cares about those rewards in the least. I'm guessing that it's all for a personal reason," I said.

"You've been saying; 'You think-', 'You're guessing-', and things like that from the start. Ayanokouji-kun, you're simply speculating things--"

Now it's Horikita who was interrupted by Sensei.

"Horikita, his speculations were all on point, weren't they? This is one's not an exception. I do have my own personal obsession and reason for reaching Class A, but that's not for you kids to know about. Just remember that I'm on your side as long as Ayanokouji works his way there." Chabashira-sensei shrugged her shoulders.

I thought so... "Sigh... Well, that's all for my business with you, Sensei. Horikita, it's your turn." I turned to Horikita for the first time.

"Oh, I thought Horikita was just your spectator," teased Chabashira-sensei.

"Sensei, I'm not satisfied with my placement in Class D. I'm sure I did well on the entrance exam, and I don't remember making any mistakes on the interview. So, why? I would like to know the reason for it," asked Horikita with a serious expression on her face.

"I was prepared to be asked that question for a while now, so I have my answers ready. Telling students about their entrance exam results isn't normally allowed, but I can make an exception for you, Horikita. To be honest, I'm impressed. You had the third-highest overall result for your entire year. It's the same with Yukimura, who also scored amazingly. Both of you did perfectly well on your interviews, too." Chabashira-sensei clapped softly.

"Then why...? If Yukimura-kun and I are superior students, why are we in Class D?" Horikita, who was both confused and angry with what she just heard, asked strongly.

"Horikita, who decided that smart students are the superior ones?" Chabashira-sensei's expression suddenly turned serious.

"W-What..." Horikita muttered reflexively.

"Well, that's all I can tell you. I can't say anything further." With that, Horikita turned to glare at me.

"Do you believe my theory now?" I asked, to which Horikita responded with a click of her tongue.

"Oh, Ayanokouji's figured it out and has told you about it already? What's with that, Horikita? You didn't even need to ask me at all, did you?" Chabashira-sensei said in a slightly mocking tone.

"I acknowledge Ayanokouji-kun's intelligence, but that doesn't



mean he's a superior student. I believe that I can do better than him in academics, and I'm confident enough in my athletic abilities." Horikita said with indignation.

"Oh, really now?" Chabashira-sensei looked at me with a curious smile, probably because she also has no idea what the extent of my abilities was.

"Well... I'm sorry, Horikita. But I don't think you can beat me in either of those. And you should know that I don't need to brag nor lie about this. If you don't believe me... then I guess we can try competing in the first early quizzes and physical tests," I said.

"Are you serious...? Fine then, we'll see who's more superior when the time comes," She says that, but her confidence definitely took a hit when I told her that she can't beat me. I don't think I sounded arrogant because I was simply stating a fact. She must've sensed that I was just telling the truth.

"Well then, if Yukimura or any of your other classmates got a problem with their placements, just tell them what I told you here today. In this school, we value the talents and potentials of our students. We don't focus on one aspect alone. We try to nurture everything so that you can become an upstanding citizen in the future." Chabashira-sensei said, as a matter-of-factly.

"Thank you for your time, Sensei. Horikita, let's go?" I asked.

"Yeah... Let's go." Horikita followed me after bowing lightly towards Chabashira-sensei.

Not able to bear the silence, Horikita instantly asked me when we reached the third floor.

"Were you really not lying? Are you that confident in your abilities?" Horikita asked with a glower.

"Yeah. For reference, I can easily ace the entrance exam if I wanted. Or wait... maybe that's too light of a reference... Horikita, do you know if  $\gamma$  is rational? Do you know the answer to  $\pi + e$ ? How about the Birch and Swinnerton-Dyer Conjecture, or perhaps the Riemann Hypothesis?" I asked.

"What in the... I... I can guess that those are mathematical concepts, but no... I don't. I don't know them. Why would you suddenly ask that?" Horikita became even more confused.

"Those are some of the math problems that remain unsolved to this day. I've reached a level where I've learned everything about math that I have nothing left to ponder about but those unsolved problems. Does that make a good reference of my academic abilities to you?" I asked with my usual monotonous voice.

"That's just... ridiculous... Do you seriously think I would believe that...?" Horikita gasped.

"Of course not. You're free to believe whatever you want." I



continued to walk, turning my back to her.

Horikita and I continued walking our way to the dorms. When we reached the lobby, I started talking before we jump into the elevator.

"Do you still want to talk in my room?" I asked.

"No... I think I'm good for today. I need some time to think about the things I've learned from our conversations..."

"I see. We'll just continue tomorrow then," I responded.

Oh, I almost forgot.

"By the way, Horikita. Is it alright if I ask for your contact info?" I immediately started trying to grab my phone.

"Oh... That's fine." Horikita said yes without much commotion. I'm glad. Knowing her, I thought I was going to get brutally rejected.

After I got a hold of her info, the elevator door suddenly opened because we'd reached the fourth floor.

"See you tomorrow, Horikita." I gently waved my hand.

"Yes. See you tomorrow." Horikita responded, but she only stared at me with her usual cool expression.

I would probably head down again later to buy some food. I changed my clothes and lay on the bed for a bit.

"7:32 PM, huh?" I muttered under my breath before plugging my phone to charge.

High school is pretty nice, isn't it?

I honestly thought that to myself. I wonder what else I could learn here. It would be great if I make more friends- not just from my class. But if I want to do so, my time is limited. Once the first month is over, we'll be at each other's throats. Making friends outside the class around that time will be drastically more difficult.

Sigh... On second thought, high school is pretty hard, isn't it?



## Vol. 1: Chapter 5.1 - Ally

It's day three of my time here in the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School.

The class behaved well during the lessons, and I asked Sudou during lunch once again. This time, we were with Kushida's group. It's a good thing that Sudou isn't acting as obstinately as he would be due to my presence. Kushida and her friends were a bit scared at first, but when I started complimenting Sudou's unexpected gentle nature, he responded to meet those expectations. Everything seems to be going well for him... at least for now.

After our afternoon periods, Sudou hurriedly ran to his club.

"Later, Ayanokouji!" He waved his hand at me.

"Yeah. Good luck." I waved my hand in response.

"You've been getting along really well with Sudou-kun, huh?" commented Horikita.

"Don't suddenly appear behind me," I replied.

"I have something important to talk to you about." She went straight to the point.

"Sure. Let's go to my room then." I grabbed my bag and started walking outside.

"Uhm, Horikita-san. Can I talk to Ayanokouji-kun for a second?" Kushida ran up to me and asked.

"You don't need to ask for my permission. I'm not his owner." Horikita replied with quite the venomous tone.

"Okay... Ayanokouji-kun, is it alright?" Kushida turned to me. Wait, so I'm a second priority?

"Sure, is everything alright?" I said.

Kushida leaned in at whisper-distance. W-Woah... She smells nice...

"Are you close friends with Horikita-san?" she asked.

"Not really. We're just neighbors," I answered straight.

"Well, you see. My goal was to be everyone's friend, right? Horikita-san refused to be my friend and said she didn't want my contact info..." said Kushida, with a melancholic smile.

"You want me to be a middleman between you guys?" At least, I think that's what she's getting at.

"Yes! Exactly! Is it alright, Ayanokouji-kun?" Knowing Horikita, she might not like it. Do I need to refuse and take on the heart of a



demon?

"I'll try my best," I replied on reflex. How can I refuse when you have such a cute expression?

"Thanks! Well then, I'll contact you later so we can talk about our plan of action." Kushida waved her hand goodbye. Right now, I can say that I am a happy man.

That's weird... I can feel a lot of looks towards Horikita and me. There were definitely boys among them, but most were girls...

I quickly messaged Hirata. I pressed the send button the moment we reached the hallways.

*(14:32) [Why were our classmates staring at the two of us?]*

Not even ten seconds passed before Hirata finally replied.

*(14:32) [Apparently, a lot of the girls in our class were wondering if you and Horikita-san are dating each other.]*

*(14:32) [I see.]*

*(14:32) [Well, we're not, but that's for them to confirm. Thanks, Hirata.]*

*(14:32) [No problem.]*

*(14:32) [See you tomorrow, Ayanokouji-kun.]*

Sigh... It was like that, after all.

"Do you want to start talking while we walk?" I suggested.

"I prefer to talk about my topics when we get to your room. However, I'm fine with engaging in idle talk, as long as they aren't pointless." Not pointless? Isn't that idle talk by nature...?

"Hmm. Well, for starters, have you made any friends? If you haven't yet, do you plan on making some?" I asked.

"I've told you before. I don't need friends... However, I respect your opinion, Ayanokouji-kun. That's why I will ask you. Why are you insistent in having me make friends?" Horikita looked me straight in the eye.

"You're strong, Horikita, in terms of determination. And based on what Chabashira-sensei said yesterday, you should be pretty smart. I thought of you as someone who can become a key member of Class D. You have a sharp sense, especially with what other people may think," I evaluated. "If someone like you fails to have at least one or two allies, the only outcomes I can think of is either self-destruction or fading into obscurity."

"I have thought about it... However, even if I were to follow your advice, I'm not exactly adept in making friends..." Horikita said, pondering her words with a hand on her chin.

"Those are just reasons that you would accept. What if my main reason for that advice is just me wanting to be friends with you? Would you accept me as your friend?" I turned to her.

"Well... What constitutes friendship, anyway...?" Horikita was



visibly flustered with my question.

"Definitions, technicalities, nuances... You don't need to think about those. As long you think of me as a friend, and I'm the same, then we're friends. It's as easy as that." I answered.

Wow. I'm talking like an expert here, but I'm a zero-experience novice too. Those are just some of the sentimentalist dialogues that I've researched. They seem to be working well on someone like Horikita.

"I see..." Horikita continued thinking.

On our way to the dorms was a number of students who were greeting someone.

"Goodbye, Class Rep Ichinose!"

"Good work today, Class Rep Ichinose!"

Class Rep...? I closed my distance to this Ichinose person with Horikita on my tail. She was a very beautiful girl with long, light-pink hair...

"Excuse me. Are you the one they're addressing when they say 'Class Rep'?" I asked without hesitation.

"Eh? Uh, yes...?" The girl was caught off-guard by our sudden appearance.

"Ah, my bad for suddenly asking like that. I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, from Class D." After introducing myself, I looked at Horikita, who easily picked up on my signal.

"I'm Horikita Suzune, from Class D, too," said Horikita.

"Ahh, so you guys are in the same year! I'm Ichinose Honami, from Class B. Do you need something?" she asked, tilting her head.

"I was just curious. Are there normally class positions assigned for students? You see, our homeroom teacher has a bad habit of keeping some details from us, so I thought we might've been in the dark with this, too," I elaborated.

"Ahaha! Don't worry about it. You're not in the dark at all. This is just something that we of Class B decided on our own. It makes some things like assigning people for fairs and festivals easier. For formality's sake, we also have positions like Vice Class Representative, Class Secretary, and so on." Ichinose answered wholeheartedly.

"I see. Thank you for answering my sudden question," I nodded.

"Oh, sure. Wait, your name is Ayanokouji-kun, right?" Ichinose suddenly tried to confirm my identity.

"Yeah, why?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. Kushida-san and I became friends yesterday, you see. She mentioned your name in our conversation when we were talking about friends. She said you were her first friend. Is that true?" She poked me with her elbow while asking.



That's one sleazy expression... and she smells nice. Do girls always smell this nice?

"Well, I think so. We met on the bus, and we both didn't have friends when we enrolled here, so you can say that we're each other's first friend," I narrated.

"Ehh, that's so cool... And somewhat romantic." Ichinose said with a yearning expression.

Are girls into those kinds of stuff, after all? It's not a myth?

"Well, if you're gonna continue until we reach the topic of me and Kushida going out, then I'll say it in advance. There's nothing going on between us," I said.

"You catch on surprisingly fast, Ayanokouji-kun!" Ichinose responded with an exaggerated shocked expression, putting both of her hands in front of her mouth.

Well, you did just mention the word "*romantic*"... The way girls think... I can't predict them at all.

"Is she the reason why Kushida-san isn't your girlfriend?" She asked, looking at Horikita, who was indifferently listening to us the whole time. "Oh, but I apologize in advance if I'm wrong."

"Yes, you are wrong. There's nothing between me and Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita answered with a slight glare.

"I see. Then, I'll apologize again, Horikita-san." Ichinose lightly bowed with a smile.

"I can't really blame you, Ichinose-san. After all, it is a common assumption whenever you see two people of the opposite sex walking home together," said Horikita.

We talked with Ichinose for a few more minutes before a student she referred to as "Chihiro-chan" came forward and asked for her.

"I'm not going to ask whether there was a point to our conversation with Ichinose-san because knowing that it's you, I'm sure there was. However, please tell me, Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita suddenly asks me as we neared the dorms.

"Ichinose gave you the impression of someone on top of the social hierarchy, right? At the same time, she didn't seem aware of it. Those kinds of people tend to be the most honest and straightforward," I explained. "I would say that she's the safest option for an ally outside the class thus far. It was a great coincidence."

"You intend to make friends with our enemies...?" Horikita inquired.

"This is just a high school, Horikita. There's no need to treat everyone outside Class D with such blind hostility. Of course, it's good that you're not letting your guard down. I'm also taking into account the possibility of special exams where we ally with



everyone in our year against other students in the higher years," I elaborated.

"That's... certainly a possibility. I didn't even think of that. Chabashira-sensei didn't really say anything specific about these special exams, did she? They could be virtually anything, and we could be in trouble if they catch us by surprise," added Horikita.

When we reached my room, I immediately opened the door and put my bag on the bed.

"Want a drink?" I asked.

"It's fine, I'm not thirsty or anything." Horikita refused. Well, I'm the same, so I guess I'll just sit on the bed for now.

Horikita borrowed the chair from my desktop computer and sat on it.

"So, what did you want to talk about first?" I started.

"Because of the lack of evidence, I can't really ascertain anything whether it would be how we were sorted in this school nor the true mechanics of the S-System. That's why I'm prepared to trust you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Horikita. "I will believe your hypotheses about these matters. Chabashira-sensei already stressed it for me, and there really isn't anything we can do about our class placement at this point."

I can see the resolve in her eyes... This girl really wants to reach Class A.

"I see. I also want to aim for Class A. Since our goals align, then you can consider me your ally," I said.

"Thank you," Horikita continued. "About our class, I want to make countermeasures for the exams. As Class D students, I'm sure there will be a number of students in our class who'd do poorly in academics. I think we should do something about that."

"A study group would be the easiest and most efficient solution. I don't see why we need an alternative for it," I answered.

"Yes. A study group is indeed the way to go. We can decide on who the tutors are once we get to see the abilities of our most capable classmates. Of course, I will try my best to tutor anyone who needs my guidance."

"I don't know about that. What if they're doing so bad that their academic abilities are only comparable to that of a junior high school student?" I mused.

"That's ridiculous. Those students might be better off getting expelled then. They would only serve as a liability to the class," said Horikita, with a glare.

"But what if those exact students have abilities that they would not lose to others? For example, what if that student's Math scores were horrendous, yet their English scores are worthy of being a



tutor?" I asked. "Let's also put their positives outside of academics. What if their exam scores are bad overall, but they are extremely athletic. We have Sudou, who seems to be exactly like that. Do you think expelling them would still be a good option? And if talking in class decreases our points in some way, how much do you think it would cost us if one of our classmates gets expelled?"

"You're... right," said Horikita.

"You need to stop thinking like that, Horikita. They're your classmates, not your pawns. If you think of your friends as tools, then it won't end well for you. Sure, it might work for some people. But I've judged you to be someone unfit to think like that. Of course, that's just my personal opinion."

*What a hypocrite.*

"You don't need to clarify your position, Ayanokouji-kun. I've already decided to give you my trust. I'm fine with being criticized by someone as intelligent as you." Horikita said with a somber tone, like someone who has admitted defeat.

"Will you start telling me compliments like those in the future? If yes, then I guess I should start getting used to them," I joked.

"It all depends on what you show me. I won't hesitate to criticize you back should I witness any blunders on your part," sneered Horikita.

"Sure," I replied. She didn't get my joke, did she?

After two seconds of silence, I noticed that Horikita was staring at me intensely.

"Ayanokouji-kun." She called out to me before I could say anything.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"I would like to give you a small piece of advice..." said Horikita.

Her tone was pretty heavy. Just what kind of advice will she give me?

"Please be careful with Kushida-san..." she said, not breaking eye contact with me.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 5.2 - A Friend

"Hmm... Why?" That should be the obvious question to ask, right?

"I know you're friends with her, but even someone as smart as you wouldn't be able to see through her act that easily. That's why I'm asking you to be careful," replied Horikita.

"Kushida is acting? Hmm... Would you mind explaining this further?" I asked.

Kushida was a kind and bright person. Not only is she cute and attractive, but she's also friendly and outgoing. If one were to pitch Kushida's personality to someone who hasn't met her, they would probably say that she's *"too good to be true"*. If Horikita isn't lying, then... things might just get more interesting.

"She and I attended the same junior high. Although we didn't get the chance to be in the same class during that time, I've heard of Kushida-san's name. She was basically the same person, even back then. People would rally around her, and she would respond to their friendliness in kind," narrated Horikita. "However, during our final year in junior high, a big incident happened in Kushida-san's class."

"A big incident, huh? Do you know the details about it?" I asked.

"I don't, actually. I was too focused on the entrance examination for this school. The only things I knew were that the class became dysfunctional and that Kushida-san was the cause of the incident," Horikita answered with a sigh.

"Dysfunctional? How so?"

"From what I heard, boys started punching each other and girls hurt each other both verbally and physically. It all happened without any regard for authorities like teachers," she explained.

That's an overwhelming amount of hate.

"I see... Is that everything you know?" I tried to confirm.

"Yes. That's it. I don't know how Kushida-san did it, and the specifics of what she's actually done to start it in the first place. I'm not exactly treating her as an enemy, but I just don't want to get involved with her. I also need you to be at least aware of that incident. That way, you won't get the rug pulled right under you," replied Horikita.

"I'll need to investigate this further. It's not that I don't believe you, but Kushida is still my friend."



"Do you have a plan?"

"I'm making one right now... However, it would probably violate your wish." I glanced at Horikita.

"How so?" she asks, narrowing her eyes.

"You need to get involved with her."

"Is it really necessary?" Horikita slightly tilted her head.

"As things stand, yes. I still don't know anything concrete about Kushida. She'll get suspicious if I started asking questions all of a sudden. If I'm going to reveal what I know, then I'd need a card that I can play against her," I explained. "Truth be told, Kushida asked for my help so that she can become friends with you. I think it's a good idea, even after hearing this."

"Why would it be a good idea? I get that cooperation is key, but we would not see eye to eye. It'll bring more chaos than order, will it not? You're not telling me to act all buddy-buddy with her, are you?" Horikita raised an eyebrow.

"Of course not. All I want is for you to give her your contact info. Also, please don't talk to her in a blatantly hostile manner like you did earlier. Even if she's just 'acting', there's no need to bark at her when she's not doing anything to you. Don't worry, I'm not asking you to hang out with her or anything," I replied.

"If... it's only that much, then I guess I can comply." Horikita's face clearly told me that she didn't like the idea, but I'm glad she agreed.

After that, we talked about the lessons that the semester will cover, and some notable features that some of our classmates might possess. Time passed by quickly. The two of us noticed that it was almost five 'o clock.

"Horikita, before you go, can I ask you a question?" I suddenly addressed Horikita as she stood.

"Yes?"

"Do you consider me as your friend?"

Horikita turned away while looking down, thinking about what to say. Does she not want to, after all?

"If you really insist, then... I don't mind. Goodbye." Horikita briskly walked outside and shut the door.

To her, I might have sounded like someone who actually knows how to make friends. To be honest, I hope I really did. I want someone to share my troubles with, like any other normal teenager out there. However, my troubles aren't so normal that they can be shared with anyone. Not at all.

At the end of the day, maybe I'm the one who needs friends.

The sun was just starting to set. Sudou should be finishing his club activities around this time along with the students



participating in clubs.

Hm? I received a text from Hirata.

*(18:47) [Ayanokouji-kun, is it alright if I come to your room later? Something important came up, and we need your opinion on the matter. I'll be heading there with someone. If you agree, how about 8 PM later?]*

Something important, huh? If it's Hirata saying it, then it must be true. Or at least that's what I'd like to think.

*(18:47) [Sure.]*

And sent. Well, I can't waste my time thinking about that right now. I'll go buy some basic tools and ingredients for my own kitchen. Living on convenience store food shouldn't be too good for a growing student like me.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 5.3 - Karuizawa Kei's Secret

"I guess I should look up some recipes online and practice cooking..." I thought, looking at my purchases.

It didn't take long until a new message popped up.

(19:34) *[Ayanokouji-kun, good evening!]*

(19:34) *[Are you busy?]*

It was Kushida.

(19:34) *[No, not really.]*

(19:34) *[You wanna talk about Horikita now?]*

(19:34) *[Yes!]*

(19:34) *[Do you have anything in mind?]*

(19:34) *[Well, it's still just the first week.]*

(19:34) *[For starters, why don't you just ask her directly one more time?]*

(19:34) *[If it doesn't work, then we'll see what we can work with from there.]*

(19:35) *[You think I won't make her angry?]*

(19:35) *[Well, knowing her as a seatmate, she might just ignore you.]*

(19:35) *[But if you try acting determined instead of being overly nice, then she might consider it.]*

(19:35) *[Ehh.]*

(19:35) *[You know her quite well.]*

She put on a jealous tone. This will be a slippery slope into the topic of my relationship with Horikita, and I don't wanna talk about that.

(19:35) *[Not really.]*

To prevent that, I'll shift her attention to something else.

I checked the clock. Since I still have a little bit of time before Hirata and the other person gets here, I decided to give Kushida a call.

"Hello? That surprised me, you know? You suddenly decided to call," said Kushida.

"My bad. I just thought it would be more efficient," I answered.

"Ah, no, no. You don't need to apologize or anything... In fact, I'm actually quite happy. We don't get to hang out after school at all, so I'm glad we can talk like this outside of class, even if it's just a phone call,"



she narrated.

"I see. Well, I just thought it would be a bother to you if I asked to hang out since you have a lot of friends. I guess talking like this is fine, from time to time," I said.

*"Ahaha. Don't say that. I'd love to hang out with you again, along with Hirata-kun or Sudou-kun,"* she replied, chuckling.

If this is considered acting, then it's really, really good.

"By the way, I talked with Ichinose-san earlier. She seems like a key figure in Class B." I changed the topic.

*"Oh, so you met her, huh? Among the other classes, Class B was the easiest to get close with. A lot of them were really friendly. I guessing that it's mostly due to Ichinose-san's influence,"* said Kushida.

"They were calling her 'Class Rep', so I got curious and approached her," I added.

*"Oh, did you now? I thought you talked to her because she looked cute~,"* Kushida replied with a teasing tone.

"You're a lot cuter than her, Kushida-- if I said that, would you consider me to be hitting on you?" I asked. That was a popular line in the current entertainment media. I never thought I'd get to use it at all.

*"Geez, you could've just said it as is! Now I feel stupid for feeling happy!"* she yelled.

"Sorry, I'm just not used to these things. Since you're good at socializing, I thought it would be fine to ask you," I replied.

*"Hmph,"* she pouted, probably. *"Well, if you really aren't aware, then I don't mind telling you a few things. Mainly, it's obvious that you'll say that to a girl you like. However, you can also use it to tease your female friends. It will depend on you how you say it, and the look on your face while doing so. That advice wouldn't help you much though, since your expression and tone are pretty much unchanging."*

Ouch. She was telling the truth though.

"That's true. Thanks for telling me." I'm really grateful that Kushida's my friend. I wouldn't have known these things if it weren't for her.

Some part of me still wanted to deny what Horikita said about her.

*"No problem!"* she said.

The two of us talked about a few pointless things, like how friends usually would. Apparently, Ichihashi started hanging out with Karuizawa and Shinohara a lot more than them. Also, Mori, whom they initially thought was hard to get along with like the formerly mentioned two, was actually pretty friendly.

*"Uhm, I hate to end it here, but I promised to call Kokoro-chan around this time. I'll see you tomorrow, Ayanokouji-kun,"* apologized



Kushida.

"It's no problem. We've talked about our plans with Horikita, anyway. Good night, Kushida," I replied.

"Bye-bye." And then she hung up.

That was my first phone call, and it was with a girl. Is this what they call youth...?

Just as I was thinking about those things, I heard a knock. I checked the clock on my phone and saw that it was already 7:58 PM in the evening. It's time, huh?

I gently opened the door and saw Hirata with... Karuizawa Kei? Well, that was unexpected.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hirata with a smile.

"Good evening." On the contrary, Karuizawa had a pretty somber expression.

"Come in. Feel free to use any chair. You can sit on the bed if you want, too. Do you guys want a drink?" I offered.

"Oh, we're fine. The two of us had coffee before going here." Hirata politely refused my offer.

After they got comfortable, Hirata immediately spoke.

"I'm sure you're wondering about why we're here, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll leave the explanation to you, Karuizawa-san. Don't worry, I'm sure Ayanokouji-kun will be able to help us sort this situation." Hirata said to Karuizawa.

She seemed hesitant for a brief second but she decided to face me anyway. That expression isn't something you'd see from the 'normal' Karuizawa. Whatever it is that's on her mind, I'm about to find out.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can you promise me that whatever we'll talk about inside this room will stay in this room?" She asked me with a desperate tone.

"I see. If it's something that we're supposed to keep to ourselves, then I promise," I replied.

Since Hirata trusted me on this, it's only natural for me to respond in kind.

"Thank you..." After a long sigh, she continued. "Well, you see... I was bullied."

Karuizawa's expression contorted upon saying those words.

Bullied? Is someone bullying her right now? Or is she talking about her past?

Either way, this was a surprise. I didn't do anything but stare at her. Seeing that, Karuizawa went on with her story.

"I was severely bullied from elementary school. I've suffered from verbal and physical abuse... I got hounded by my own classmates,



punched, kicked, spit on, whatever it was that you can think of..." Karuizawa narrated, with her eyes visibly getting moist. "My desk was always vandalized, and their day wouldn't be complete without spilling large amounts of dirty water over my head in the bathroom... It was hell..."

"When I enrolled in this school, I finally got away from all of that. No one knows me... But I'm still scared that the same things might happen..." she continued.

The topic of bullying was very delicate. I can see genuine fear and anxiety from Karuizawa's expression, so I'll try my best to be sensitive about this.

"I see... I'll believe you, Karuizawa-san. However, why did you approach Hirata? Do you have anything in mind?" I asked.

Hirata answered for her.

"Karuizawa-san suggested that the two of us should get into a fake relationship. However, I didn't think it was a good idea, so I insisted to get your help on this matter," said Hirata.

I see. So that's what she's going for.

"You're wrong on that, Hirata. Karuizawa-san is actually on the right track. The only problem is that it's too early." I turned to her.

"I-I actually planned to approach Hirata-kun after a week or two has passed, but I was afraid. Shinohara and the others started talking about confessing to either Hirata-kun or you, Ayanokouji-kun," narrated Karuizawa.

Wait, something's wrong. Confess to me? As much as I wanted to delve into that topic, this wasn't the time for it. I'll put that statement on the back of my mind, for now.

"I was scared that Hirata-kun might get a girlfriend immediately, that's why I made this pre-emptive move," she explained.

"But why me?" Hirata asked the main question.

"Right now, that's still a valid question. However, once a week or two has passed, you'll be one of the most popular males in our year, Hirata. I can guarantee that. You will be the best option for Karuizawa-san's plan. She'll use your popularity to boost her own social status. That way, any thoughts of bullying from others will practically vanish." I looked at Karuizawa straight in the eye. "Plus, she's already acting like a strong-headed girl, anyway. She'll be totally fine in the future. Am I right, Karuizawa-san?"

After making a few blinks, she finally answered.

"I've been thinking about this since the first day, but Ayanokouji-kun... You're so smart that it kinda creeps me out," said Karuizawa. "Not in the disgusting way, or anything like that, of course. But you're kinda scary, in a sense. It's like you can figure everything out."



"I don't know if that's a compliment, Karuizawa-san," I replied. Well, I don't care either way.

"You don't have to worry, Karuizawa-san. Ayanokouji-kun is a kind person. I'm sure he'll use his intelligence for the good of everyone. Isn't that right, Ayanokouji-kun?" Hirata asks for my confirmation with a smile.

"Yeah. You don't have to worry. Your secret is safe with us." I assured her.

With that, she turned to Hirata and asked once more.

"It doesn't have to be now, tomorrow or, next week. But please, Hirata-kun, protect me... I don't want those things to happen to me ever again," pleaded Karuizawa.

Well, isn't that nice? That kind of plea will surely get a yes from someone like Hirata.

"It's a good idea, Hirata. However, it's still your decision," I said.

After hearing my honest thoughts on the matter, Hirata could only smile.

"You don't have to look that anxious, Karuizawa-san. If Ayanokouji-kun says it's a good idea, then I'd gladly accept your request. And personally, I'd like to do everything I can to save you." Hirata answered gently.

"Thank you..." Karuizawa thanked him with a visible expression of relief.

"So, when will you two start going out?" I started the discussion.

"How about two weeks from now, on a Saturday? The story goes like this; Hirata-kun takes me out and confesses to me before the end of the day," suggested Karuizawa.

"It seems like you've already thought this out, Karuizawa-san," commented Hirata.

"I have, actually. I've been thinking about this plan for a couple of days now." Karuizawa, who felt tense this whole time, finally smiled.

"I see. Well, I just wanted to ask. Did you ever consider Ayanokouji-kun as an option? I think he'll be popular in the near future as well." Hirata... Seriously, why would you ask that, of all things?

"I actually did consider Ayanokouji-kun. Well, only the two of you were the possible options in Class D, anyway. I figured that you're just the better option, for this plan specifically, Hirata-kun. Ayanokouji-kun didn't join a club, and his personality isn't as bright and outgoing as you." explained Karuizawa.

"She's actually right, Hirata. I would've suggested you anyway, even if Karuizawa-san chose me since my initial plan is to go incognito for the first few months."



"Eh? You do?" Hirata seemed reasonably surprised.

"I'll talk about this in detail with you, Karuizawa-san, Horikita, and Kushida next time. I want the four of you to hear about my plans for our class in the future," I explained.

"Wait, why am I included?" Karuizawa-san was visibly confused.

"You'll be Hirata's girlfriend in the near future. Your influence inside and outside the class will skyrocket. And just from talking to you this evening, I don't think you're as dumb as you make yourself out to be. You'll eventually get a hold of the girls in our class. I'm sure of it," I answered.

"Hey! Who're you calling dumb?!" she pouted, hung up on that comment.

"I understand, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll leave the plannings to you, but remember, we'll always have your back. Thank you for listening to us tonight." Hirata bowed, showing his gratitude.

Seeing this, Karuizawa stopped acting angry and bowed as well.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll try my best to cooperate in the future... as long as you protect my secret," she says.

"Sure."

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun, let's exchange contact info," Karuizawa called out with a grin.

"Alright," I replied, grabbing my phone.

"Hmm~? Are you sure it's fine to just accept it like that? Won't Horikita-san get angry~?" she teased.

"No, she won't. There's nothing going on between us." I responded with my classic monotone voice.

"There isn't? You've been together after school for two days straight now. And some of the girls from our class saw you together after the entrance ceremony. There's no way you two aren't a thing," insisted Karuizawa.

"We're really not. That girl just wanted to talk with me about getting to Class A. And she's my seatmate. It's not weird if we're close with each other, anyway," I said.

"Well, the girls were going crazy about it. They said they got beaten to the punch... Fufun~. I'm sure they'll celebrate once they know the truth." Karuizawa laughed deviously. "But I'll shatter their dreams and brag about getting your contact info first!"

This again? I understand if it's with Hirata, but this is *me* she's talking about. I'm still a bit confused as to why I'm apparently popular with the girls.

"What? You have that annoying expression where you look like you don't know what I'm talking about..." Karuizawa grimaced at me. She's unexpectedly sharp.

"I actually don't. I refuse to assume anything, so please tell me



what's going on," I asked.

"Seriously? Sigh... Well, first of all, you're already attractive on the outside. After showing the entire class how smart you are, it's only natural for girls to get attracted to you," explained Karuizawa. "Hirata-kun has his own charms, but yours is entirely different. At least, that's what I heard from my friends who were crazy about you. I can't really explain it myself."

Crazy? That's a pretty strong word...

"Don't look so scared. You're not gonna get kidnapped, you know?" joked Karuizawa.

"Fine, fine..." After showcasing my abilities, I calculated that I'll be regarded highly by my classmates... However, it came with unexpected results like these... "It's getting late. You two should go now."

Hirata, who was just watching the two of us with a gentle smile, snapped back into reality.

"You're right. Let's get going, Karuizawa-san," said Hirata.

When I went to see them out of the door, Karuizawa turned to me and bowed once more.

"Ayanokouji-kun, thank you for tonight. I'm counting on you..." she said.

"Don't worry. Hirata and I will do everything we can for you. Just don't make trouble for the class," I replied.

She nodded. And with that, the two of them exited my room. I'm alone once again. This day was quite eventful as well...

Getting Karuizawa-san on my side this early was a pleasant surprise.

Once I stabilize the class, I can start doing some recon on other classes. If this school distributed its students the way I think it did, then there will surely be at least one threat from each class...

#### *Author's Notes:*

*Because of Kiyotaka's popularity inside the class, the girls going for him felt threatened with Suzune's presence. This made some of them think about confessing to the two male prizes of Class D early on and getting some advantage. This affected Kei's plan which made her spill the beans much earlier than expected.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 6.1 - Optimal

"Ayanokouji-kun, Sudou-kun! Wanna have lunch with us?" Karuizawa Kei calls out to us from the front.

I turned to Sudou with a meaningful look. After he nodded, I just shrugged my shoulders in response.

At the cafeteria were eight people sitting at a long table including me. Hirata, Sudou, Karuizawa, Shinohara, Sonoda, Ichihashi, and Maezono. Five girls and three guys. I don't really know what to feel about this, but it's a new group for Sudou. It's the last group he needs to mingle with before he gets a stable position in the class.

After we ordered our food, the eight of us started eating normally. Of course, Karuizawa and her gang started chatting with us.

"Isn't it amazing? Like, we have our class's soccer hottie, basketball ace, and genius on one dining table!" Karuizawa started.

She's impressive. Like I instructed, she elevated Sudou without singling him out. Sudou became slightly flustered while Hirata just answered with a smile. Also, "*genius*"? We haven't even had our first test yet.

"It's pretty fun, too. All of them have, like, completely different personalities from each other. You wouldn't think that any of them are friends," added Maezono.

"Well, Sudou-kun and I haven't really talked much, but as someone who also likes sports, it'd be nice if we can become friends. What do you say, Sudou-kun?" Hirata instantly took that opportunity.

"Well... Since you're Ayanokouji's friend, then I guess I don't mind being your friend, too. We're all in the same class, after all," replied Sudou.

This is perfect. Under normal circumstances, Sudou would've just lashed out at Hirata. However, the atmosphere is too nice and gentle that even he got influenced by it. Of course, it wouldn't have been enough if it weren't for the past three days of non-aggression.

"I'm really surprised about you, Sudou-kun. During the first day, there were a lot of rumors about you picking fights at Keyaki Mall. The girls in our class were quite scared of you. But as it turns out, you're not that hot-headed at all," said Ichihashi.

"Oh... Well, those rumors are true. I would've been in a lot of



trouble if Ike and the others didn't stop me." Sudou explained with a guilty smile.

"Ohh, that's interesting. But in my opinion, you'd be a lot cooler if you play things out with a stoic expression... For example; like how Ayanokouji-kun does it." Sonoda turned to look at me.

"Exactly! He's usually really quiet, but he speaks so well when it matters. I'll never forget what happened on the first day of school. He looked so cool." Ichihashi followed, giving me a weird look.

"I see..." Sudou whispered while staring at me with a curious gaze.

"Hey, hey! Hirata-kun is getting left out! He's the hottest out of the three of them, you know?!" Karuizawa protested.

She saved me there... I didn't even know what to say.

"Well, that's a matter of course. I've been hearing a lot of girls in Class C and B talk about Hirata-kun right from the first day," said Shinohara.

"You give me too much credit," Hirata said before continuing to eat.

"Nah, you're just too humble, Hirata," I commented.

"Right?! Hirata-kun's overwhelming with humility." Karuizawa added.

Minutes passed and we finally finished eating. The eight of us got to know a bunch of things about each other in quite the roundabout manner. I wonder if that's how it usually goes for conversations between high school friends.

So far, none of them are really fit for anything apart from Karuizawa. I guess I can leave those four girls alone, for now. I'll be counting on Karuizawa to handle them when the time comes.

I received a text the moment we arrived in the classroom. It's from Kushida.

*(12:42) [It seems like you're here now, Ayanokouji-kun.]*

*(12:42) [Horikita-san just finished eating her lunch, too.]*

*(12:42) [I'll ask her now so please look after me.]*

*(12:42) [Good luck, Kushida.]*

I gave her a thumbs-up when she looked at me. She replied with her own thumbs-up, which looked very cute because of her determined expression. Well, if it's her, I'm sure she can do it. The result is already set in stone, anyway. As I thought about it, Kushida walked up towards Horikita's seat and got her attention.

"Is there anything you need, Kushida-san?" Horikita asked with a slight glare.

Kushida was surprised by this. She expected Horikita to turn her away immediately, and in a harsher manner too.

"Uhm, Horikita-san. I know you refused me yesterday already,



but I really want us to be friends! For starters, is it alright if I get your contact info? I-It's fine if you refuse, really. I'm not forcing you," said Kushida.

Since it's almost time for the next period, most of us are already inside the classroom. The only ones who're really paying attention were Kushida's friends and me. If everyone was looking at them, Horikita would've felt much more uncomfortable. Kushida picked a really good time.

"I didn't expect you to do it today, but I figured that you'll ask me about this once again. I wrote everything on this piece of paper. If you really insist, then I don't mind giving you my contact info. However, I would appreciate it if you don't invite me as often to any get-togethers." Horikita replied with a sigh. "I wouldn't strictly call us friends, Kushida-san. However, you're free to call me that if you want."

Kushida was visibly perplexed by what she just heard. But, she was clearly happy with the result. I was also impressed with Horikita's willingness to cooperate.

"T-Thank you, Horikita-san! I didn't expect you to have such a considerate and gentle side." said Kushida. Well, I wouldn't say "*gentle*".

"If that's all, then it was nice talking to you, Kushida-san," Horikita said, trying her best to not sound arrogant.

*(12:45) [Good job, Horikita.]*

I texted her.

*(12:45) [I felt disgusted from start to finish.]*

She replied without looking at me. Well, I guess it's only natural when you know the conversation is nothing but a farce. And it must've felt extra-unsettling for her since she firmly believes that Kushida was just acting.

When the bell rang, our afternoon periods went on without a hitch. As expected, our class is behaving optimally. There are a few problems like the flippant attitudes of Ike and his friends or the too-reserved Sakura, but other than them, I believe I've shaped up the class pretty well after four days.

Well, I guess I have some time for a breather. It wouldn't hurt to hang out with some friends after school.

*I need to remember that right now, I have the privilege to enjoy my peaceful high school life, away from that place, and away from that man.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 6.2 - Cementing a Friendship

When the dismissal bell rang, I walked up to Sudou and asked.

"Heading to your club?"

"Oh, Ayanokouji. Yeah, I am. We'll have practice matches with a few senpais today, so I'm really excited," replied Sudou.

"I see. Do you mind if I watch you for a bit?" I asked.

"Huh? I mean, I don't mind, but don't you have anything more important to do?" Sudou was curious about my sudden suggestion, which is reasonable.

"Not really."

I need not say more. To be honest, I just really want to watch Sudou do his club right now. Even I have an agenda in mind, it shouldn't be boring at all.

"Well, let's go then. I'll tell the senpais that I have a friend who wants to watch," he grinned.

A few of our classmates greeted us goodbye. Of course, we responded in kind.

After we got to the second gymnasium, Sudou asked permission for me. Of course, the seniors were lenient and said yes. After all, I'm also a potential member of the club. I sat in the bleachers' area and had a clear view of everyone.

"Yo, Ayanokouji! Tell me if you decide to leave, alright?!" Sudou yelled from the court.

I raised my hand as if to say "I got it" and Sudou continued with his practice. As I thought, it wasn't boring at all. I didn't know anything about basketball, but even I can say that Sudou was amazing. There were even times where he'd do those so-called "*dunks*". The senpais were visibly impressed by him.

A couple of hours passed and it was finally time to wrap things up. The first years were usually the ones to clean things up, but the seniors decided to cut them some slack for today.

"Good work today!" Everyone exchanged courtesies.

Sudou and I walked out of the gymnasium and headed for Keyaki Mall.

"Man, that sure was tough! The senpais in this school are pretty strong!" Sudou said, clad in his uniform. His jersey sure looked wet.



If he's practicing this much every day, his athleticism was only natural.

"Those two other first years were giving you weird looks though," I commented.

"Ah, Komiya and Kondou, huh? They're from Class C if I remember correctly. I always felt that they were kinda hostile, but they haven't really done anything yet. I'll beat their asses up if they pull anything funny though." Sudou laughed while clenching his fists.

"Sigh... It would be better if you didn't. The trouble it would cause will be humungous," I sighed.

"W-Well... I guess that's only natural," he said. So he wasn't joking, after all?

"You know, Sudou, I won't tell you what you should do, but as a friend, I'd like to give you some advice. I don't know where you're from or what you've been through, but your actions affect the class now," I said.

"Hey, I know that much. I'm not actively looking for trouble, you know?" Sudou replied in a displeased tone. He must despise the act of getting lectured.

"I really appreciate that, and I'm sure everyone in the class does, too. But, what if the other party provokes you themselves? I'm sure you're already aware of this, but your patience is extremely thin, you know?" I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well... I've always been seen as a violent outcast from a young age, and it's not really far from the truth. You can even say that it's actually just the truth. I guess it just became natural to me... Y'know, beatin' other people up when they get to my face," narrated Sudou. "Basketball courts were the only places where I can have a cool head..."

Sudou looked up to the sky, seemingly trying to recall stuff from his old days.

"You're amazing, Sudou. I can't really tell how much since my knowledge in basketball is close to nonexistent, but I've been comparing your performance with everyone on the court. You're levels above them, in my honest opinion." I commented.

"Thanks..." Sudou scratched his cheek in response to my genuine compliment.

"That's why it would be great if I can see you play until graduation, or even beyond that." I turned to him with a serious tone. "This school is harsh with its punishments. If you get into disputes where violence is involved, you'd probably get suspended, or at worst; expelled. As your friend, I don't wanna see that happen."



Sudou looked at me with a gentle yet somewhat guilty expression.

"I can see that you've been working hard in keeping the class together in your own way, Ayanokouji. In basketball, I can only rely on myself and blame myself for everything. But, with you, it should be pretty frustrating if the class harmony gets disrupted by a few troublemakers," he said. "As your friend, I don't want to be one of those people... I know I can't change myself easily, but I'll try my best to stay out of trouble."

Saying that, Sudou held out his fist towards me. I did the same and we fist-bumped.

"Thanks. Take your time. We all gotta start somewhere," I replied. "I'll be relying on your athletic abilities when the time comes."

I'm there'll be a time where Sudou would become a vital part of the class... This preparation would be well worth the time.

Before we reach Keyaki Mall, Sudou suddenly turned around and asked me.

"Ayanokouji, I've been thinking about this for a while now, but you're extremely athletic-- no, you're extremely strong, aren't you?" Sudou looked at me with a serious pair of eyes.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"When I lost it during the first day, I was fully ready to charge at those three upperclassmen. I didn't hold back on my strides at that time. But, you stopped me, didn't you? And with a single hand, too. It felt like I just bumped into a really hard wall... That shit calmed me down completely."

I see. Well, I didn't really think much about that time. I just wanted to prevent Sudou from getting into an all-out brawl. I must've instinctively used all of my strength.

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm wimpy." I don't think playing dumb is the answer here. Sudou would just feel insulted at that point. "But I haven't really compared my strength against anyone. If that's your take on the matter, then I'll believe it."

"Heh, you're not only smart, but you're also pretty strong... You're incredible, Ayanokouji." Sudou laughed.

"Well, even if that's the case, I can't climb up to Class A without you guys helping me. I'll be counting on you in the future," I replied.

"You got it," Sudou responded with a thumbs-up.

After we grabbed a drink from Keyaki Mall, Sudou and I went straight back to the dorms. My evening was well spent on text conversations with a bunch of girls. Karuizawa's friends, in particular, were quite forward in asking me about the types of girls I'm attracted to. Well, not that forward since they were disguising



their questions with the classic "*asking for a friend*" schtick.

"Kushida, huh? Well, I guess buying what I need will cost some points. I'd need Sotomura's help if I want the best price-for-quality options," I muttered. "But if I wanted to be sure, I'd probably need *those*, too. I wonder if I can find some inside the campus."

If Horikita was telling the truth, then Kushida's matter should be of utmost importance. If I don't handle it perfectly, it might spell disaster for Class D...

*Author's Notes:*

*This might be a bit late, but feel free to correct any wrong stuff that I write. English is, like, my third language so I might make some mistakes. Thanks for reading!*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 6.3 - The Curtain Closes for the Prelude

Finally, it was Friday. As usual, classes went on without a hitch. After Chabashira-sensei addressed some things in our afternoon homeroom, Hirata and Kushida immediately went in front to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone, may we have a little bit of your time before you go?" asked Hirata.

Apart from Kouenji, who got up from his chair and walked out of the door, everyone sat down and listened. He's currently the biggest enigma in this class.

I instructed Hirata, Kushida, and Sudou to ignore him even if he leaves. That way, we can proceed without any unnecessary commotion.

"So, Hirata-kun and I have a quick suggestion. I'm sure all of you are aware of this and might be using it already. I'm talking about the chatting app in our phones." Kushida says, raising her phone screen for everyone to see. "I've heard from Ichinose-san that they already have a group chat with everyone in their class. I think it would be a good idea if we do the same."

Everyone instinctively grabbed their phones. At that moment, Karuizawa's group made their move.

"Yeah! Let's get everyone in one group chat! That way, we can easily talk about things without worrying about eavesdroppers!" Karuizawa started, making sure everyone inside the room heard what she said.

"It's about time!" followed Shinohara.

"Let's do it!" added Sonoda.

Due to their wonderful display of interpersonal skills, Hirata, and especially Kushida got everyone into the class group chat. Well, everyone besides Kouenji.

Apparently, it was a common practice for students to make an official group chat for their class. If that's the case, then I guess it was only a matter of time before ours was formed.

Since I was free the entire afternoon, I decide to stroll around the campus. As expected, everything's really of the highest quality.



I finally went inside the so-called "*special building*". It was definitely uncrowded, used only for some clubs... It's quite the sizeable building, too. Well, what can I say? This school is basically a place of affluence.

Coming down from the third floor, which didn't have any security cameras installed, I decided to head for Keyaki Mall.

Huh? A person? I tried to hide but immediately threw the idea after seeing who it was.

Sakura Airi, a girl from my class. She was currently taking pictures of herself, not wearing her glasses nor her blazer. She wasn't in her usual hairstyle and demeanor too. She's like a completely different person.

I waited until she finished her current round of picture-taking. After that, I finally decided to show myself.

Seeing my approaching figure, Sakura panicked and immediately made a run for it.

Anticipating this, I dashed in her direction and caught her wrist. I took extra care into holding my strength back as to not hurt her by accident.

"Kyah-?!" she yelped.

"Uh, Sakura? You're Sakura Airi, right?" I asked. "I'm Ayanokouji. We're from the same class, remember?"

She turned to me instead of continuing to run. This might be the only advantage of my dull tone. If I sounded as energetic as Ike or Yamauchi, Sakura would probably yell and ask for help. I felt her resistance wane a bit after I identified myself.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to grab you like that. I kind of panicked when I saw you run out of nowhere," I explained, gently releasing my grip on her wrist.

"U-Uh... Uhm..." Sakura stammered.

"Are you perhaps displeased to be seen in here?" I asked.

"N-No! It's not like that... I'm not really keeping this a secret to anyone... I-It's just that... Uhm-" She's really nervous, isn't she?

"Well, first of all, calm down. We're the only ones here, anyway. For starters, why don't we grab something to drink. There's a vending machine right around the corner if I remember correctly."

Sakura seemed surprised by my words, but she meekly nodded in agreement anyway.

The two of us sat on a staircase connecting the first and second floors.

"Here," I said, handing the orange juice that Sakura requested.

"Thank you..." she accepted sheepishly.

"It wouldn't be fair if I just keep asking questions, so I'll speak first," I said. "I was strolling around the area because I was curious..."



Well, that's about it. What about you, Sakura?"

She flinched slightly after I asked the question.

"Well, I... I like taking photos... You must've seen it too but... I especially like taking photos of people," answered Sakura.

"That's interesting. I've noticed it for the past few days, but you don't really talk to people much. I think making friends is a good solution if you want to take pictures of more people," I babbled.

Well, there I go again-- advising people to make friends as if I'm good at it.

"I'm not... really good with talking to people... so..." Sakura replied, with her voice getting progressively softer.

"Ah... I see. I understand that, Sakura."

"Eh, you do? Don't you have many friends, Ayanokouji-kun? Like Hirata-kun... or Kushida-san and Horikita-san..." she asked.

"Well, I guess you could say that. But, I'm actually just really lucky, you know? If it weren't for certain events, I would be nothing but an outcast in the class," I narrated. "I'm not good with talking to people nor do I have any redeeming features. Meanwhile, you look pretty nice with your hair like that. It makes you look more approachable."

I noticed that I might've made the same mistake as last time right after I finished speaking.

Sakura must've gotten put off with the last parts of my reply. It would've been okay if we were close, but if she thinks I'm hitting on her after we just met, then it's pretty much game over. I took Kushida's advice to heart, so I'd remember these things.

I should clear it up before it's too late.

"Ah, I didn't mean that in a weird way, Sakura..." I said.

Sakura was just staring at me the whole time. It's like she was observing my struggle. Before I could say anything, she giggled cutely.

"You're funny, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakura. "I didn't think you were someone who'd worry about those things."

"Well, Kushida already gave me an earful about being careful with my words. I just don't want people to misunderstand what I'm saying," I explained.

"I see... Now that you've told me that, I guess it makes sense that you think you're also bad at talking to people," replied Sakura.

Small conversations, to be specific.

Seeing someone's vulnerable side would make you more comfortable around them. It seems to be working well. Sakura stopped stuttering and her nervousness is almost completely gone.

"Well then, I was originally headed to Keyaki Mall. Are you gonna continue taking pictures of yourself?" I asked.



"Uhm, yes..." Sakura replied.

"I see. I hope you get great photos. If it's alright, I would appreciate it if you show them to me sometimes."

That would've been the perfect time to smile, but my indecisiveness ultimately lead to me losing the chance to do so.

"I-I'll try-! Goodbye, Ayanokouji-kun..." Sakura shyly waved her hand to me.

I don't know if my first interaction with Sakura was alright, but at least it wasn't a complete disaster. In fact, I even got her contact info.

I texted Karuizawa and confirmed that she was with Hirata and her friends. I met up with them to hang out. Since the attention was divided between me and Hirata, Karuizawa had more chances to build up her relationship with Hirata in the eyes of outsiders. Of course, Hirata cooperated, giving Karuizawa a bit of extra attention.

Even if I wasn't too great at conversing with the girls, they didn't seem to dislike me by the end of it. In fact, I was asked to hang out with them again on the weekend. Of course, with nothing else to do, I accepted.

However, I actually want to spend my Sunday with Kushida. After all, I wanted to *know* her more.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 7.1 - Swimming Class

"Good morning, Yamauchi!" Ike greeted enthusiastically.

"Good morning, Ike!" Yamauchi responds with the same amount of energy.

While these two always arrive on time, it was definitely strange for them to arrive this early. With huge grins on their faces, Ike and Yamauchi called out to each other as soon as both of them got to the classroom.

"Whew, man! I was looking forward to today so much that I barely slept last night!" said Ike.

"This school is just the best, isn't it?! Well, the class points and the S-System aside, isn't it awesome that we get to have swimming classes with girls?!"

They were right. Even for the standards of a regular high school, this event was rare. Horikita, Kushida, and every other girl in our class will be showing off a lot of skin. It only makes sense that the boys were excited.

Well, Ike and Yamauchi were probably too excited. The girls slowly backed away from them as if trying to not catch a transmissible disease.

"Professor, will the plan be in motion?" Ike asked Sotomura, who was initially fiddling with his laptop.

"*Professor*", huh? Considering his expertise in things like technology, I guess it was an appropriate nickname. With his chubby build, he'll probably look like a young professor if he wore a coat.

"Why, of course, Ike-dono. I believe everything will go smoothly. We'll get our hands on those records," answered Sotomura.

"Perfect! Oh man, I can't wait!" Yamauchi celebrated.

"Hey, what did you guys mean by record?" I asked softly while approaching them.

"Huh, Ayanokouji? Hmm? Why should we tell you? You might just snitch on us." Ike asked with the expression of a veteran skeptic.

"Yeah! You're close with girls, right?" Yamauchi added.

"Do I look like someone who's close to girls? Those were all because of Kushida and Hirata's social powers. I wouldn't hold a candle to you guys if it's with talking to people-- let alone girls..." I



replied.

Ike scooted over and scanned me with his eyes.

"Well, that might indeed be true. You seem like the type of person who'll stay quiet in a social gathering," mused Ike.

I probably will.

"Now, now. It wouldn't hurt to add the class's genius into our plan, right? I believe that with Ayanokouji-dono's intellect, he might even find improvements to our plan!" Sotomura excitedly cut in.

"What are you guys planning anyway?" I asked.

"Professor will pretend to be sick. That way, he can observe the girls' boobs from the side and record their sizes." Yamauchi whispered with a ragged voice.

"He might even get pictures if we're lucky," Ike added, with a creepy grin on his face.

"Alright, count me out. I don't wanna be hated by my peers just yet," I replied, putting my arms up in the air.

"C'mon, dude! This might be your only chance to get some juicy information on the girls!" Yamauchi implored.

It seems like Hondou, Miyamoto, Makida and some other guys are also in on it, albeit not as involved as these two.

"While I won't join you guys on this noble quest, it's not like I'll get in the way. Just be careful about being accused of sexual harassment," I said. "Especially you two, Ike and Yamauchi. You guys are already branded as perverts by the girls, you know?"

"W-Wait! Are we really?!" Yamauchi asked with a panicked face.

"Shit!" Ike agonized before asking. "Wait, how'd you even know that?"

"Insider information," I replied, pointing a finger to my head. "I might not be close with the girls, but I still hear a bunch of stuff when I hang out with them."

Ike and Yamauchi gulped in awe and amazement.

"We'll squeeze more of that information outta you someday, Ayanokouji!" Ike protested.

"Sure," I replied, not even looking at them. "Professor, I need your help on something."

In the end, I decided to use his nickname, much like Ike and the other guys.

"Oh? I wonder what the one and only Ayanokouji of Class D needs help with?" he asked.

"Well..." I told him the information I needed. Fortunately, it was easy to make him believe a fabricated excuse when he asked for my reason.

"Thanks, I'll follow your advice to save up a bunch of points," I



said.

"I don't know why you think it's worth it just to keep those boys in check, but who am I to judge the great mind of the class genius?" Professor shrugged his shoulders.

I'd appreciate it if he stops calling me the class genius or whatever, though.

After Sudou arrived, Ike and Yamauchi egged the two of us to join them again. Apparently, they were doing bets on the girls' breast sizes... I'd be lying if I say I wasn't interested, but Sudou and I knew the risks of getting involved. In the end, we chose to do nothing but listen.

Sakura and Hasebe were among the top bets. I wonder how they'd react should they find out about this...

The morning classes finished and lunchtime came. Sudou and I ate with Kushida and her friends like it was perfectly natural. Of course, it was finally time for our swimming class when the afternoon bell rang.

"Alright! The pool!" The boys changed considerably fast. When we reached the 50-meter pool, all of us were in awe of how clean and clear the water was.

"Aren't the girls taking too long?" Ike looked around impatiently.

It took about four minutes before the girls finally arrived.

"They're here! Let's g-- Huh?! What the?!" Ike put on an expression of extreme confusion.

As it turns out, only ten girls decided to participate in the swimming class.

"Where are they?! Where are the tits?!" Ike wailed in frustration.

"If you're looking for our other classmates, they're over there." I pointed at the observation deck.

Hasebe and Sakura can be both seen sitting there. Well, there goes their dreams of ogling the biggest breasts in class.

"Ah, this is bullshit!" cried Ike.

"I-It's fine, Ike! We'll make do with whoever's present!" Yamauchi consoled him with the same defeated expression.

At this point, I don't even want to be part of their conversation. Sudou and I can clearly see the revulsion in the girls' eyes.

"Ayanokouji-kun! Sudou-kun! You're already here! What are you guys doing there?" Kushida called out to us.

Along with Horikita, she and the other girls were all clad in school swimsuits. Kushida became the center of attention with her voluptuous figure. The sad expressions that Ike and Yamauchi wore instantly vanished.

"Kushida-chan!" Ike and Yamauchi yelled.

While the two of them fawned over Kushida, Horikita came over



and talked to me. I couldn't help but look at her as well. Horikita's figure was absolutely pristine. She was definitely blessed with top-tier genes. I chose to stay silent because I might accidentally lose my life if I voice out my opinions on her current appearance.

I can sense that Karuizawa was currently looking at me. Perfect timing-- because I actually needed her to do something for me. While Sudou's attention was on Ike and Yamauchi's shenanigans, I looked back at Karuizawa, which made her flinch. I gave her a meaningful look using subtle head movements. Thankfully, she got what I was trying to say.

"Sudou-kun! Woah, look at that build! Is it alright if you come here for a sec?" Karuizawa yelled.

"Huh? You called me?" Sudou was surprised that Karuizawa suddenly called out to him.

During that time, I approached Horikita and walked away with her. Seeing that, Sudou felt that it was fine to leave me alone. Now, most of the girls were talking to Hirata and Sudou.

"Sudou-kun, that's some crazy amount of muscle!" Maezono followed Karuizawa's lead.

Ike, Yamauchi, and other guys were clearly envious of the attention that Sudou was getting, but it's not like they could do anything.

"Do you workout, Ayanokouji-kun?" Horikita asked.

That was an expected question, seeing how she was carefully observing my body for a while now. Meanwhile, I would be branded as a pervert if I did the same. Society really is cruel, huh?

"Not really... At least in recent times, I'm not," I replied.

"It's not noticeable when you're wearing clothes, but your muscles are really toned..." Horikita said, looking at my torso and arm muscles.

I don't really know what to say at that point. Fortunately, our teacher, Higashiyama-sensei, finally arrived. He was a macho-looking middle-aged man; the kind of guy who devoted himself to sports. He gathered everyone who was participating and grouped us up.

"Alright, although some opted to only watch along the sidelines, there's still quite a lot of you. I'll let you all do some warm-ups and practice-swimming. After that, you'll compete with each other. Is that cool?" His huge smile didn't really put us at ease, but at least he wasn't here to go spartan on us.

No one ditched the swimming class. On the observation deck were four guys and ten girls. Participation was optional as long as we were present, so hopefully, we won't lose class points because of this.



I didn't really want to go all out, but I'll at least try to swim fast enough to get first or second place. My body's not in optimal condition anyway.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 7.2 - Limits

I warmed up alongside Sudou, Hirata, Kushida, Karuizawa, and their friends. Horikita warmed up in another corner, alone.

Of course, Ike and Yamauchi spent their time staring at Kushida and the girls.

We were given ten minutes to play in the water for a bit. The pool was temperature-controlled so we didn't have any problems with the water being too cold. My body swiftly adjusted to the water's viscosity.

Hirata was playing with Karuizawa and some of her friends. Meanwhile, Sudou was... playing(?) with Ike and Yamauchi...? It looked like they were getting drowned though...

Anyway, I was enjoying my time, splashing water with Kushida and her friends. On the other hand, Onodera was having a fun(?) talk with Horikita. Because we were near them, I could barely hear the contents of their conversation.

"Your form was amazing earlier, Horikita-san! Did you compete during junior high?" Onodera asked excitedly.

"No... not really. I don't think that I'm particularly great at swimming..." Horikita's expression was cool as always. Although she didn't seem used to having these kinds of talks, I'm glad she's at least acknowledging the other person.

"You see, I've always loved swimming, so I can immediately identify a good swimmer just by looking at their forms. You're definitely one of them, Horikita-san." Onodera said with a smile.

"I see... Given your words, you're definitely the faster one, in my opinion, Onodera-san. I just learned swimming as a necessity, after all," replied Horikita. She's making good progress if she can give back compliments like that.

"Well, I definitely won't lose to anyone when it comes to swimming! You can count on me for that!" Onodera gestured like she was flexing her biceps.

While we were immersed in enjoying the water, our teacher finally blew the whistle.

There will be two races for the girls, with five competitors each. They will be placed according to their time in a very straightforward manner. Meanwhile, the boys will then have a similar competition. However, only the top two from each race will



advance to the next round. After that, the top eight will compete for first place. All students in the top eight (separated by sex) will be safe from supplementary lessons. So, only the bottom two for the girls and the bottom eight from the boys will take them, along with those who didn't participate this time.

"Ayanokouji, let's compete in the preliminary round!" Sudou excitedly suggested.

"Sure," I replied.

Finally, our teacher blew the first whistle. Horikita and Kushida were in the same race. Their difference in speed became apparent immediately. In the end, Horikita finished first with Kushida coming in second.

"Not bad. 27.55 seconds for the first place and 30.89 seconds for the second place," he announced.

The boys cheered for Kushida and had their eyes glued on her wet body. The girls' jiggling butts and breasts caused some "accidents", prompting some of them to sneakily cover their crotches.

Of course, I also stared at the girls much like the rest. The only one who was avoiding visual contact with the girls' bodies was probably Hirata.

On a side note, I can't help but notice the domineering aura that Kouenji was emitting since the start of this class. Wearing a red speedo, Kouenji smilingly observed the girls' competition with his arms crossed.

The girls were constantly showing expressions of discomfort whenever they look at him. It's probably because their eyes would reflexively look at his crotch. That aside, Kouenji's physical constitution was amazing. He's clearly built better than Sudou. He'll probably be one of the fastest, if not the fastest student in our class.

When Sensei blew his whistle for the second round, Onodera took the lead by a landslide. She wasn't kidding with her words earlier.

"26.02 seconds for the first place and 30.75 seconds for the second place. Amazing results for the two of you," said Sensei. Onodera convincingly took first place with Horikita in second place. They were then followed by Matsushita and Kushida.

"Alright boys, line up! Get four asses in here!" called Higashiyama-sensei.

"I kinda don't want to swim yet..." I said with a tired expression.

"Hah? Are you pussying out, Ayanokouji? C'mon, let's do it right on the get-go!" Sudou implored.

However, before my decision could change, four boys were already in position.

"Kyah~! Go, Hirata-kun!"



"Hirata-kun, you can do it!" The girls' cheers rang, whether it's by the pool's edge or on the observation deck.

"Tch! I'll definitely show Hirata what's up when it's my turn!" Ike and Yamauchi grumbled.

"Heh, I'll beat Hirata once I get there," Sudou said confidently.

Hirata was not just a pretty boy. He was also well-built. His figure was probably the ideal one for a high school boy.

"Alright, ready!" Sensei yelled before blowing the whistle.

Hirata dove perfectly as his body cut through the water. He effortlessly swam across with speed, placing him ahead on the first round, with Minami following behind.

"Alright! It's our turn, Ayanokouji!" Sudou slapped my back. That hurt, you know?

"Fine..." Since it's just the preliminary round, I guess I can take it easy. I won't let Sudou take first place that easily though.

"Geh-! Sudou?! Nevermind, I'm dodging this round!" Ike backed off along with Yamauchi.

"Ayanokouji-kun, Sudou-kun, do your best!" Somehow, a lot of the girls cheered for us much like they did for Hirata. In my periphery, I can see Ike, Yamauchi, and some of the boys glaring at us with envious eyes.

"Ready!" And Sensei blows the whistle.

Water splashed as the five of us dove in. I wasn't perfectly used to moving my body at this point in time, but the comforting sensation of the water helped stabilize my form.

"Oh, incredible! 24.39 seconds for the first place and 25.12 seconds for the second place!" Sensei announced with vigor.

"Kyah~! What was that? That was amazing!"

"Ayanokouji-kun was super fast!"

"He looked so cool~!" Well, I finished first in our round with Sudou closely coming in second.

"What the hell was that, Ayanokouji?!" Sudou yelled at me.

"That was a close one, Sudou. Nice fight." I replied with a thumbs-up.

"Nice fight my ass! I expected you to be fast, but not that fast!" Sudou continued with a pissed expression.

"You can always get revenge on the final round. We're both in the top two, remember?" I said, holding out my fist.

"Tch, I'll destroy you next time," Sudou replied with a determined smile, bumping his fist against my own.

While the gymnasium was filled with the girls' cheering voices (for me), Horikita briskly walked in my direction. She finally stopped after arriving right in front of me.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, facing her terrifying glare.



"What was that?" she asked.

"What do you mean *"What was that"?*?" I threw the question back at her.

"... " Horikita continued glaring at me.

"I already told you, didn't I? I'm above you in terms of physical abilities. It's the same with academics," I said straight.

"At this point, all I can do is believe you. The results are absolute evidence, after all." Horikita sighed with a frustrated expression.

"Don't mind it, Horikita. You're still an excellent student overall. Just leave me out of the equation when you compare yourself with others," I replied.

"No, it's fine. I'm not really angry or jealous about your abilities. I'm just... disappointed with myself, I think," she narrated. "I'm disappointed not because you're better... but because I hastily judged myself as someone superior."

"You don't need to, really. If you grew up seeing yourself ahead of everyone else, it's natural to underestimate others," I mused. Her initial arrogance hinted at that kind of past. Seeing that she didn't correct me, I must've hit the bullseye.

"You're... right..." Horikita looked down at her feet. Before she and I could continue our conversation, Kushida and her friends ran up to me excitedly.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you were amazing!" Kushida said with a huge smile.

"Ayanokouji-kun, that was hella awesome! Were you on a swimming team back in middle school?! You must be, right?!" Onodera was the most fired up of the bunch.

"Not really... I guess I'm just pretty fast," I replied, while awkwardly scratching my head. Onodera's energy was too much for me.

"Ayanokouji-kun is from America, so he must've been used to seeing fast swimmers!" Kushida said proudly.

"Woah, America!"

"That's the first time I've heard of that!" Well, I guess she spilled the beans.

Eventually, the third round resulted in Miyake and Ike winning the top two places. While he wasn't particularly special, at least he was a bit faster than average. He didn't really have any tough competition, so he barely made it in second. At the same time, Yamauchi finished last, one second behind the fourth placer.

"You betrayed me, Ike!" Yamauchi cried.

"Hehe! Well, don't sweat it, Yamauchi, it's only natural that you'd lose to me in terms of swimming. I'm actually built for this kinda thing!" Ike said with confidence. No one knew if he was telling the



truth or not.

Of course, the inevitable last round came. Kouenji stood on the fifth lane with his flashy red speedo for everyone to see.

Some of the girls cheered for Miyake after he placed first. Kouenji waved at them, thinking that the cheers were for him.

"It's alright, ladies. Don't cause a commotion because of me. I belong to everyone, so please calm down." Kouenji announced with his eyes closed.

When Sensei blew the whistle, water splashed violently as Kouenji dove without reserve. His aggressive style definitely caught everyone off-guard. Kouenji was incredibly fast. He was most likely faster than me and Sudou.

"23.22 seconds! That's the record for the day! Congratulations, Kouenji. Good job on taking the second place with 28.61 seconds, Makida." Sensei said with a grin.

"My abdominal muscles, back muscles, and psoas major muscle seem to be in good shape, as usual. Not a bad performance." Kouenji said as he went up the pool. He elegantly swept his hair up with a smirk. The guy wasn't short of breath at all, as if he didn't swim in the first place.

And with that, the top eight for the boys was completed. Honestly, I couldn't care less about placing high. I'm already safe, anyway.

"Alright, you mermaids! I want to see you fight until the end. That's why I'll give an incentive to the guy who finishes first!" Sensei's grin got wider as he announced the prize. "I'll give the first placer a generous sum of 10,000 points!"

Everyone gasped.

"Of course, I'll give Onodera 10,000 points too, for placing first among the girls," he continued.

"Heh~? No fair!"

"I would've taken it seriously if you told us that, Sensei!"

Some of the girls complained.

"Oh, sure. There are a lot of extra lanes. Go beat Onodera's record and the points will be yours." Sensei replied without hesitation. Of course, the result wasn't surprising- the complainers shut their mouths.

Horikita didn't seem like she was attempting to do anything. I guess even she knows her limits.

Now, back to the issue at hand. At first, I didn't really care about the results for this final round. I'd even let Sudou surpass my time... But 10,000 private points is quite tempting, especially since I'll need to spend on something.

Kouenji's time was a little over 23 seconds. I think I can perform



better than my first attempt if I tried, but beating Kouenji is an entirely different story. Even the coordination of my limbs felt rusty, after all.

Well, all I can do is swim as fast as I can. Let's see how that goes.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 7.3 - One Aspect of Excellence

At first, Sensei only used two stopwatches on each hand for the top placers, but now, he assigned helpers to record all of our times with precision.

"Alright, I'm assigning seven of you to assist me in recording your classmates' performance. At the same time, I'll assign seven supervisors to confirm your timings. You can use the stopwatch function on your phone. I'll give one piece of advice for the time setters." Sensei grinned. "Don't think about anything else. Focus solely on the swimmer you're assigned to."

From the other side of the pool, I can see that Matsushita was assigned for me, with Miyamoto behind her. Meanwhile, Horikita was assigned for Kouenji, who was standing beside me. Okitani was the one supervising her.

The assignment of the lanes went like this:

Lane 1: Hirata - Kikuchi, Kushida

Lane 2: Miyake - Yukimura, Yamauchi

Lane 3: Ike - Karuizawa, Satou

Lane 4: Makida - Higashiyama-sensei

Lane 5: Minami - Maezono, Shinohara

Lane 6: Sudou - Onizuka, Ueno

Lane 7: Ayanokouji - Matsushita, Miyamoto

Lane 8: Kouenji - Horikita, Okitani

"Let's have a fun swimming time, Ayanokouji-boy," Kouenji said without looking at me.

He must be confident then. Like me, Kouenji doesn't look like he's interested in competing seriously. But of course, he wouldn't just let himself fall behind. Alright, let's see what you got.

"I won't lose this time, Ayanokouji," Sudou said, focusing his sight on the finish line.

"Yeah. Good luck to us," I replied.

"Ready!" I focused my attention entirely on the whistle's timing. When the sound reached my ears, my whole body felt a small jolt of lightning. Finally, the cogs in my body started working with each other.

It's time to let loose.



*Splash.*

My diving figure perfectly nailed itself into the water. When I started using my limbs for propulsion, I can faintly feel Kouenji and Sudou's presence beside me. At the same time, the sound of my classmates' cheers entered my ears. Well, I don't have the luxury to care about any of those right now.

I swam with absolute consistency and finished the race. When my body rose from the water, so did Kouenji's. I don't know who won between the two of us.

"22.17 seconds," said Horikita, with Okitani nodding his head in agreement.

"Hmph," Kouenji once again swept his hair up in an elegant manner. What a monstrous amount of stamina. He didn't look tired at all. This time, he looked at me with a smile. "Impressive, Ayanokouji-boy. I can only applaud."

At that time, I was also gently swiping my hair. When I turned, Matsushita was frozen while looking at her phone. Miyamoto was the same.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun... Your time was... 21.91 seconds..." Matsushita stutteringly conveyed to me. "I didn't miss the timing, right, Miyamoto-kun?"

"Y-Yeah... Your timing was perfect, in my opinion..." replied Miyamoto.

While all of those were happening, not only the girls, but the boys also cheered loudly.

"That was insane!"

"Those three were basically zooming in the water!"

"What is this?! The Olympics?!"

"Did Kouenji win?!"

"Didn't you see?! It was absolutely Ayanokouji!"

"It was so close that I didn't even notice the difference!"

"Kyah~! Ayanokouji-kun! You were amazing!"

"Hirata-kun, you were so fast, too!" Everyone was going crazy. Even the students sitting on the observation deck stood up and went closer.

When I looked in Sudou's direction, he was glaring at me in frustration.

"You even went faster, you bastard!" he barked.

"It would be an insult to you if I held back, right?" I asked, shrugging my shoulders.

"That's... You're right..." replied Sudou. "Ahhh, shit! Fine, you win, Ayanokouji! But remember this, when it comes to basketball, I'll make sure that you won't even score one point against me!"

Sudou yelled, declaring war.



"Nah. Let's not compete in basketball. I don't wanna be your punching bag." I snapped back.

"Hahaha!" Thankfully, Sudou's mood wasn't bad at all. "I'll challenge you some time, so make sure to learn more about basketball!"

Our friendly banters didn't last long when Sensei dragged his huge body next to me.

"Haha! Ayanokouji, you got first place! Hold out your phone. I'll transfer the points now," he said with a grin, patting my shoulder with his huge hands. "Congratulations."

I'm surprised that things like these were allowed. Points really do drive the economy of this school...

The final standings were as followed:

1st: Ayanokouji - 21.91 seconds

2nd: Kouenji - 22.17 seconds

3rd: Sudou - 24.32 seconds

4th: Hirata - 25.11 seconds

5th: Miyake - 27.73 seconds

6th: Makida - 28.50 seconds

7th: Minami - 32.01 seconds

8th: Ike - 33.85 seconds

Sensei left us to play around using the remaining twenty minutes. The girls instantly swarmed me more than they did with Hirata. In fact, the boys did the same. They asked me all kinds of questions and my mind immediately went blank.

"Alright, everyone. You're all confusing Ayanokouji-kun. Please calm down." Thank you, Hirata. You're my savior.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Matsushita absent-mindedly staring at me. When I turned to look at her, she immediately averted her gaze.

"Ayanokouji! I heard you were from America! Were you on the national swimming team over there or something?!" Ike asked loudly.

"There's no doubt about it! Even if he's not, I'm sure Ayanokouji-kun competed in some tournaments, at least!" Onodera agreed with Ike.

"Uh... I guess I did some swimming back in the day..." Of course, I would answer vaguely. I don't want to fabricate a story if I can help it.

I've engaged in friendly conversations with a lot of my classmates afterward.

Even if Ike and his friends kept glancing in the girls' direction, they were genuinely talking to me and Sudou about the results. After that, a lot of the girls on the observation deck called out to me



when I sat by the poolside below them. Of course, Kushida and her friends chatted with me, too. I've been thoroughly branded as the swimmer of the class alongside Onodera.

When the class ended, Sonoda and her friends invited me for karaoke. Of course, Karuizawa and Hirata will be there. At the same time, Kushida and her friends asked me to hang out with them too. Another offer came up as Sudou wanted to teach me some basketball. In the end, I humbly declined all of them. After all, someone already asked me first.

(14:54) *[Being popular is hard, isn't it, Ayanokouji-kun?]*

I was currently having a conversation with Mori Nene via text.

(14:54) *[It's just the novelty. This will probably wane down tomorrow.]*

(14:54) *[Haha! I don't think so!]*

(14:54) *[But your ridiculous swimming speed aside, are you really cool with hanging out with us?]*

(14:55) *[Sure.]*

(14:55) *[You're the one who asked me first, anyway. And I always wanted to go to Pallette.]*

(14:55) *[Alright!]*

(14:54) *[I'll tell Satou-san and Matsushita-san that I got a yes.]*

Apparently, Satou and Ike organized the whole thing, and Mori asked them if she could invite me. There will be six of us; three boys and three girls. At this point in time, I know that Ike and Yamauchi weren't acting at all. What they've shown thus far were their real personalities. While I'm a bit disappointed, it's pretty fun to hear their conversations.

I heaved a sigh of exhaustion as I slumped on my chair.

"How does it feel to be so popular?" Horikita asked curtly. Of course, she didn't look at me. She was currently reading the later parts of *Crime and Punishment*.

"Not so good. As a person who dislikes trouble, I can't help but get tired..." I complained.

"A person who dislikes trouble, huh? But you still agreed to hang out with a group, right? I thought you weren't a Yes-man," snickered Horikita.

"Oh shut it, Horikita. Why don't you come with us so I can talk to someone?" I asked, turning my head in her direction.

"What? There's no way. I can't even imagine myself hanging out with such a group." Horikita was... displeased...? Her words were certainly rude, but her expression wasn't really that of an upset person. It was more of a... neutral expression? An equitable expression? Unemotional? Detached? I honestly can't tell.

"Such a group? Ah, I can see where you're coming from. After all,



Ike and Yamauchi are coming with us. But putting them aside, Mori and the rest are pretty okay. I think you can become good friends with them," I explained.

As usual, Horikita was quick to judge them in a negative light. She truly was a veteran loner.

"You were thinking of something rude, weren't you?" Horikita asked with a glare.

"No, not really," I replied, averting my eyes away from hers. Our conversation probably ends there. Or so I thought...

"Will it not inconvenience them if I go?" Horikita suddenly asks.

Wait, huh? What? Did she just-?

I was so caught off-guard by her words that the only thing I managed to do was stare at her with a dumbfounded look. That reaction proved to be a big mistake.

"Nevermind. I take back what I said. You can go have fun on your own," said Horikita.

Her tone was noticeably deeper, which indicated her anger. With unfortunate perfect timing, the dismissal bell rang. Horikita swiftly fixed her stuff before getting up to leave.

"Horikita--" I tried to call out but it was too late.

Seeing her retreating figure made me slightly depressed. I can't believe I messed that up...

#### *Author's Notes:*

*To put things into perspective, the world record for the 50m course overall is 20.19 seconds by César Cielo (2009). Meanwhile, the junior world record is 21.46 seconds by Michael Andrew (2018). Both of which are long courses (50m pool, same as the one in here).*



## SS.1 - Matsushita Chiaki: What Are You Thinking About?

It's been a week since the entrance ceremony and I can say that everything's been fine so far. When our class found out the truth about the S-System, I'm sure each and every one of us panicked. The beautiful paradise that was the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School... actually held our futures by the throat.

As someone who was born in a well-off family, all I had to do was reciprocate the efforts of my parents by achieving academic excellence. We had mutual respect for our abilities in that regard and my kind parents had me grow up in an environment with no restrictions on my freedom.

In the end, I've envisioned many suitable futures for myself. Working as a flight attendant in an international airline or a major airport company, or simply marrying a financially capable man would've been satisfactory.

However, those changed when I entered this school because I could finally aim for much higher goals. It would be great if I could study at a prestigious university abroad. After that, countless opportunities would open up for me. Everything would've been smooth sailing from here on out, or at least that's what I thought...

There were a lot of "*would*" and "*could*" in my path to a good life, but of course, obstacles are inevitable. The S-System turned out to be a poisoned apple. I was assigned in Class D, which was actually a class for the so-called "*defects*".

For the past week, one thought still terrifies me. If it wasn't for *him* doing what he did on the first day, I can see our class's inevitable doom... I wasn't an idiot, but even I can grow ignorant. If Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun didn't buy the information on the S-System, we would've been too complacent to even observe basic school rules. I can only shiver in terror when thinking about how low our class points would've been if we stayed ignorant... After being with my classmates for the past week, I can see that dark future happening.

"Sigh... What am I even thinking about?" I sighed.

"Yeah, I've been wondering about that, too." A voice reached my ears.



"Huh-? Ayanokouji-kun?" I panicked.

"Did I startle you? My bad." Ayanokouji-kun was calm as always.

The six of us were currently walking together on our way to Keyaki Mall. After doing some light shopping, we'll relax in Pallete. Well, that was the plan. Right now, Mori-san and Satou-san are talking with Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun.

Fufun~. Those girls really look like they'd rather talk with Ayanokouji-kun instead. But I understand that they don't want to leave a bad impression on him by ignoring the other two. At the same time, they're making him seek them out. A smart move. Luckily, I acted pretty aloof today, so Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun might've found it hard to approach me.

Now that I think about it, while being friends with Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun seems fine, and even fun sometimes, I just can't see myself entering a relationship with either of them. That would also be the case for most of the boys in Class D, which makes sense.

As someone who evaluates herself quite highly, I would like a capable partner.

"There you go again, Matsushita-san. Really, what are you thinking about?" Ayanokouji-kun asked softly.

"Oh? Why are you so interested, Ayanokouji-kun?" I asked with a smile of confidence.

"Those four really seem immersed in whatever their conversation is about. I thought it would be nice if we could talk about something ourselves. It's fine if you're too occupied with your thoughts, though," he explained.

"Too occupied with my thoughts? Who says that? Are you a psychiatrist, Ayanokouji-kun? Or perhaps a clinical psychologist?" I chuckled in response.

He's probably panicking right now. It'll be fun to see his composure crack with a little teasing. No matter how much of a critical thinker or academic genius Ayanokouji-kun is, I was confident in my ability to get in other people's heads. In other words, psychological warfare. On the surface, Ayanokouji-kun was an easy target because he doesn't look like an expert conversationalist. I'll find out whether that's true or not.

"I'm not trying to say any trendy lines... You really just look like someone who thinks deeply about certain stuff," he said. "I was also curious about earlier. You were staring at me with a weird look on your face. I've always wondered; what you were thinking about during that time?"

Guh-! M-My one weakness... I can't believe he remembered that embarrassing moment.

Ayanokouji-kun was an impressive swimmer-- no that's an



understatement at this point. He was someone who's unmatched. When I was assigned to him, I was wholeheartedly excited because I knew he would rank among the top and it would be fun to time his performance. However, when Sensei blew the whistle, I was almost terrified at how fast he approached me.

In the end, he placed first, surpassing Kouenji-kun, who was favored to win due to his preliminary result. Of course, I didn't space out to the point where I forgot to time him properly. However, I couldn't believe what just happened and I thought I made some sort of mistake.

When I faced Ayanokouji-kun to tell him his time, I was quite... stunned. His toned body was wet, and it glistened as the droplets of water formed a puddle under him. It was one thing for him to be unbelievably fast, but he didn't even look out of breath. The face I saw as he slowly combed his wet hair with his hands looked incredibly... handsome.

His face has been on my mind since then, which resulted in my absent-minded staring when he got swarmed by our classmates. He was just so...

-?!

No, no... What am I even thinking about? Well, I don't want to sound defensive, but I don't have any strong romantic feelings for him or anything. But, I think it would be fine to say that I have developed a small crush on him-- just a small one.

"Were you thinking about the results?" he asked.

That was basically a free run-away pass from absolute humiliation. If he genuinely meant to ask that question, then I'm lucky... But if he knew about my current mental predicament and chose to give me an escape... That would be... scary. I wasn't in his head. He was in mine.

"Uh, yeah. You didn't really answer anyone earlier, so I'll ask again. Just how did you swim so fast? In your introduction, you didn't say anything about liking swimming. But from that performance, it looked like you were training to be the best in the world," I explained.

Perfect, now the conversation is all about him.

"To tell you the truth, I've trained rigorously in swimming when I was young. That's probably why I got so fast. I didn't mention it in my self-introduction because I never loved swimming in particular," he answered.

That's fair... Still, I may not know what the world record is for the 50-meter freestyle, but even I can tell that his speed was almost superhuman. Well, there's no use in prying any further. If he's hiding anything regarding his past, I might just displease him.



"You were pretty fast, too, Matsushita-san. You even beat Kushida in the placements."

"I can't really say I got lucky, can I? Well, you see, I'm not that physically capable, but it's not like I'm a spoiled, sheltered girl," I explained. Of course, my choice of words was carefully handpicked.

"I see. If that's the case, then I guess your placement was well-deserved." Ayanokouji-kun replied, with his everlasting composure...

Why isn't he asking anything about my family or my background?! Is it because he knew I would bounce the question back at him?

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun-- I can't get a good read on him at all.

I've decided that from then on, I'll keep my eyes on him. Of course, it's not because I'm in love with him or anything like that... I mean, I'm not dumb, so I know it's possible that things might eventually be that way... But right now, I don't feel that strongly about him. It's more like I'm curious about who Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is. Just how far do his abilities go? I may be an excellent student, but it's highly likely that he's leagues ahead of me. If there are more students like him in this school, then I might rethink my self-evaluation of being in the top 10%.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 8.1 - Evaluation

It's the 26th of April, the Monday of our fourth week in this school. The class has been doing alright after three weeks. Before our third period, I found myself reading back on some text conversations between me and Karuizawa Kei.

*(21:56) [Hirata-kun did it.]*

*(21:56) [We're going out now.]*

*(21:56) [I see.]*

*(21:56) [That's good then.]*

*(21:56) [You've done well in establishing a stable foothold in our class, and after this, you'll probably be regarded as the girls' leader.]*

*(21:57) [Yeah...]*

*(21:57) [It'll be different with Kushida, who's more on the universal side of things with her kindness and friendliness, but I'm sure you'll be just fine.]*

This conversation happened two days ago, on a Saturday evening. In the end, they chose to delay the plan by a week. It's probably for the best since Hirata's popularity was just hitting its peak outside the class. Hirata texted me about this, too.

*(21:58) [Ayanokouji-kun...]*

*(21:58) [Wait, you know what, I'll just call you.]*

That was the last message she's sent since then. As for our call...

"Hello?" I asked.

*"Sorry for my sudden call," Karuizawa said.*

"I don't mind. Sorry if I was being too wordy with my texts. I'm just not used to it yet," I replied with an apology.

*"It's fine. That's your well-established quirk, right? A lot of girls think it's cute-- your lack of conversational skills, I mean," Karuizawa elaborated.*

"Is that how it works? I thought it's just a negative trait," I mused.

*"You really are a beginner when it comes to these things aren't you?" she snickered. "First of all, you're the class's academic genius, answering every question perfectly when asked by the teacher. To be honest, none of us will be surprised if you aced every written test or exam. And secondly... you're super-duper athletic... Like, super-duper..."*

I stayed silent in the midst of her lack of vocabulary.

*"On paper, you really are the ideal boy in our class alongside Hirata-kun. But unlike him, you're not that outgoing and friendly. You can even*



*be considered gloomy at times,"* Karuizawa explained.

"That's exactly my point..." I think she just dissed me on the last part there.

*"Yes, that's exactly the point. You two are different, but one's not better than the other. After all, girls have their own preferences, just like guys. On one hand, there are a lot who prefer a princely boy like Hirata-kun. On the other hand, a star student who's actually insecure about his social skills is also a hit among girls."* Karuizawa seemed to be having fun while telling me this.

"Is that really how it works?"

Of course, I'm also curious. The intricacies of modern social high school norms aren't something that I'm really familiar with.

*"Yeah. What do they call it again? Ah, that's right! "Gap-Moe"! Yeah, that's it," she said. "Have you heard of it? You don't seem like you watch anime or read manga, so it might not be familiar to you."*

Woah, that's great. I've actually encountered gap-moe during my research. I never thought I'd hear it again since a lot of the stories that use the concept seem unrealistic.

Well, the ironic thing is that it's being used to describe me...

"I've heard of it. It's the affection to the inconsistencies between two different or opposite characteristics of a person, right?"

Now that I think about it, it's kinda like Karuizawa. On the surface, she's a strong-willed tough girl which gives you the impression of a bully. But on the inside, while she's still strong-willed, she's actually a very delicate and observant girl-- most likely caused by the bullying she's suffered.

Then again, while it didn't look like she was lying about her past, it's not like I believed everything that she told us.

*"Yeah, you're right... But geez, your knowledge on it seems like nothing but a definition pulled out from a dictionary..."* And she was exactly right about that. *"Wait a minute, we're going on a complete tangent! I haven't gotten to the main reason why I called you!"*

"Which is?" I asked.

*"Well... I just wanted to thank you and Hirata-kun... You know, for protecting me and stuff."* Karuizawa said.

"It's no problem. You've been cooperating well, so I don't have any complaints," I replied. "If that's all, then why don't we end the call here? You just got yourself a boyfriend. Won't it be bad to be on a call with another man?"

*"I don't really mind. It's just a farce, anyway."* Karuizawa replied instantly before panicking. *"Ah-- Unless you're against it, of course!"*

Well, that was completely unexpected.

"Not really."

After that, we did some friendly small talk. She told me about



some of the girls in class. It's pretty much the same as how Kushida would tell me her stories. Of course, a lot of them are pointless stuff, but those pointless stuff were actually kind of fun to hear about.

Maybe this really is the essence of friendship, much like how Sudou would tell me about his club matters.

"Ah-! We've been talking for a while now. Let's call it quits for tonight, Ayanokouji-kun," she said.

"Sure. I had fun, Karuizawa," I replied.

And the call ended. I noticed that I got a bunch of texts from different people. Mori, Satou, Rino, Yokoyama, and some other girls. There were also a lot of notifications from Class D's group chat and the smaller group chats that I'm a part of, too.

Well, it's not like I have anything else to do. I'll try to chat with them while I can.

"You seem to be thinking about deep stuff." Horikita suddenly spoke while I was reminiscing about my weekend.

"Not really. Just some random stuff," I replied.

In the end, the plan was a success. After they flaunted their relationship in public, rumors quickly spread. Karuizawa's popularity was instantly boosted. She was cute, anyway, so it's not like other girls had complaints apart from being a bit jealous.

Before we could continue our budding conversation, Chabashira-sensei entered the classroom.

"Alright, class. Today, we're going to have a short test. Please pass these to the back." Without any explanation, Chabashira-sensei's cold words reverberated across the room.

None of us reacted in a way that caused a commotion, but a lot of our classmates had nervous expressions.

"Since you already know about the S-System, it's alright for me to tell you more than what other classes are allowed to know. Frankly, this test is just a reference. There will be no risk involved because the results won't be reflected on your report cards. That's what we're supposed to say to our classes. However, you are different," she explained. "You can probably already guess that this test will reflect on your class points for May. This surprise test is taken by freshmen every year during the end of their first month."

Horikita and I instantly looked at each other. Her face indicated a little bit of panic. If she's telling the truth, then we're not that immune to the system even if we know about it. After all, even if no one misbehaves in our class, they can still opt to not listen to the discussions.

We only had preparations for midterms and final exams, so no



study groups have been formed yet. In other words, the ones who are bad at studying are clearly in trouble.

In the end, we can only give this test our all.

"No cheating now. Harsh punishments are in line should you break the rules." Chabashira-sensei announced as she walked around the classroom.

After scanning the test, I noticed that a lot of the questions were too easy. With a rough estimate, it's about two levels below what we took in the entrance exam, in terms of difficulty. I answered everything quickly, but as I reached the end of the test...

As I thought...

The last three questions were too difficult for any students in our year. It's almost like they were put on the test by mistake. For now, I'll just answer them.

Finally, I was finished with the test. After doing a brief check, I'm pretty sure I answered everything correctly. I scanned everyone as they did the test. Hopefully, the results wouldn't be too bad.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 8.2 - Past

All of us finished the test way before the time was up. Seeing this, Chabashira-sensei collected our papers roughly five minutes before the bell rang.

"Your fourth period is free. Use your time wisely, and don't make too much noise. In conjunction with this test, please be ready for your midterms at the end of May. Goodbye."

With her usual detached expression, Chabashira-sensei walked out of the room.

Almost immediately, Hirata, Kushida, Horikita, and I stood up in succession. For the class, this much was normal. We've already been recognized as the four pillars of Class D. They paid attention to the four of us as we headed to the front.

"Everyone, I'm sure all of you are feeling uneasy about the test just now. But I'm sure we'll be fine." Hirata began the discussion.

"That's right! A lot of the questions were really easy, and even if the last parts were super hard, they can't really expect us to answer them correctly," added Kushida.

I can clearly see the anxiety of our classmates slowly whittling down. I glanced at Horikita, prompting her to speak next.

"The test was composed of easy questions ranging from the first to third-year junior high level. If you remembered the lessons from back then, you can answer those questions with ease," Horikita explained. "There was one question about our initial lessons this semester per subject. Most of them were basics, so I believe they are doable."

Yukimura raised his hand.

"Yes, Yukimura-kun?" Horikita calls out to him.

"I agree with what you've said thus far, but not everyone is academically gifted. If those who struggle lag behind, it might bring trouble for the class." Yukimura stated as he fixes his glasses.

Some of our classmates' expressions tightened with worry and guilt. From Yukimura's expression, I can see that he's more worried about the class as a whole rather than the ones who are bad at studying in particular, which was understandable.

"You're absolutely right, Yukimura-kun. We were thinking about this matter for a while now. This test just caught us off-guard," Horikita replied, before looking at me.



"We are aware that some students in Class D struggle with academics. That's why we have a proposal. The results in this test are inevitable so all we can do is brace ourselves. But setting it aside, we can at least prepare better for our midterm exams," I explained.

This was a great opportunity. Using this test as an example, we can drive our classmates to agree with us much easier.

"Everyone, we would like to form study groups. Is that alright with you all?" asked Hirata.

Almost instantly, Karuizawa answered his plea.

"I'm in! I struggled, like, super hard on the later parts of that test, and I don't really understand the lessons too well. I think a study group can help me a lot." Karuizawa chimed in before facing her friends. "You found it hard too, right? I think we can improve our scores with this."

"True! The teachers are great, but like, I just can't seem to understand a hundred percent of what they're talking about," followed Shinohara.

At that point, everyone echoed their opinions amongst each other. We didn't try to shut them up so they can make up their minds. When she thought the time was right, Kushida went in for the decisive question.

"So, everyone? Are you all in?" she asked, with a smile.

"I'm in!"

"Please take care of us!"

"I want Kushida-chan to teach me!"

"I want Ayanokouji-kun to teach me!"

"Count us in, too!" The class voiced their agreement. There were a few people who didn't engage in the discussion, but that's fine. I'll keep tabs on them to see what I can do to help. I'm sure the situation is hard for them as well.

"We'll discuss the details about the study groups after the test results have been tallied. We would like to divide the class efficiently and assign tutors for each small group," Horikita explained.

"Of course, we won't force anyone who isn't willing to join. It's completely alright if any of you would like to study alone," added Hirata.

The class listened intently until the end. Of course, Kouenji is just being Kouenji. The four of us didn't really mind him. Horikita, Kushida, and I were all aware of his personality right from the beginning. We convinced Hirata to leave him alone at the moment, so long as he doesn't inconvenience the class.

"Thank you for listening, everyone! I hope we can all work



together as a class for the exams!" Kushida finished with a bow.

Using the final half-hour of the fourth period, cliques and groups chatted with each other.

"Sorry, Ayanokouji. I tried my best, but that test was just too hard for me. I have to admit, I can't even listen properly during discussions. It takes everything I have just to stay awake, you know?" Sudou apologized.

He was currently hanging around my seat. Horikita was also facing us.

"It's fine. I'll personally be the one to teach you. We'll work towards improving your test scores. Of course, you'll have to sacrifice a bit of your club time. Is that alright with you?" I asked with a gentle expression.

"I see... Hmm..." Sudou began to think. It's already a good thing that he's considering it.

"Sudou-kun, I advise you to take Ayanokouji-kun's offer, lest you get expelled." Horikita cut in with a stern expression.

"Wha-? I know that much!" Sudou turned to me before whispering. "Hey, Ayanokouji, what's up with Horikita? Why's she all prickly and shit?"

Of course, what he said was still audible to Horikita. Her eyes narrowed with a glare.

"Isn't she usually like that?" I replied with a question.

"Really? Wasn't she quite nice when we first met? She even introduced herself politely." Sudou mused.

She did. And given my first impression of her, I also found it strange.

"Isn't it rude to just boldly talk about the person right in front of you?" Horikita glowered at me before turning to Sudou. "And Sudou-kun, don't get any ideas. I thought you were close friends with Ayanokouji-kun back then. I only greeted you because I didn't want to leave a bad impression on him. He might've refused my request to talk with him otherwise. But now that we're a bit close, that doesn't matter anymore."

Man is she straightforward.

"By *"close"*, you mean friends, right?" I asked in an audacious manner.

"That... Whatever..." Horikita looked away with a *"hmph"*.

"The hell?" Sudou obviously got a bit upset.

"Don't mind her, Sudou. That's just her personality. Anyway, are you in?" I went back to the main question.

"Well, you said you wanted to see me play 'til graduation, right? I can't go about gettin' myself expelled this early." Sudou grinned with a thumbs-up. "I'm in. Teach me as fast as you can, a'ight?"



"Sure. But of course, that'll depend on your learning speed," I replied, with my own thumbs-up.

I can see Horikita sigh lightly- probably in relief. However, I'm sure it's not just Sudou. Our strategies will come into shape once we get a hold of everyone's tentative academic abilities.

"Ayanokouji-kun, before I forget, how did you find the last three questions? They were 2nd-year level in terms of difficulty, or maybe even beyond. Even I couldn't answer them with confidence," Horikita asked, looking straight into my eyes.

"I'm pretty sure I got them right," I answered while turning away.

"What...? I know you're an excellent student as you've been flawless during class discussions... But even if that's the case..." Horikita's composure cracked. "So you're saying you got a perfect score...?"

She must've not expected my answer.

"Most likely. You'll see when Chabashira-sensei announces the result," I replied.

"The fact that you can say that without a hint of arrogance... Just who are you?" asked Horikita with her eyes trembling.

"I don't know the specifics of what you're talking about, but isn't it safe to say that Ayanokouji's just that smart?" Sudou butted in.

"You don't understand, Sudou-kun..." Horikita pressed.

"Drop it, Horikita. I don't really like talking about my past. I would appreciate it if you stop," I said.

According to my research, people who don't like talking about their past are fairly common. I shouldn't sound too suspicious. Hearing my words, Horikita flinched gingerly. It's like she was snapped back to reality.

"I see. I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita looked down as she apologized but immediately turned up to face me again. "However... I would sincerely appreciate it if you can tell me about yourself some time in the future."

"I'll think about it." Even with that genuine request, she's still trying to trap me.

Horikita wanted me to counter back by arguing that *"she hasn't even told me anything about herself"*. If I said that, a deal would instantly be formed with her saying that she'll tell me everything about her in exchange for the information she wants. I don't know what she has in store with her past, but *that place* isn't something an ordinary student should know about.

Horikita bowed lightly. Shortly after, the bell rang and all of us had lunch.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 9.1 - Classroom of the Elite

May 3rd, Monday.

Everyone was quietly sitting on their seats five minutes before the bell rang. All of us patiently waited for Chabashira-sensei. However, instead of being nervous, all of us were actually celebrating in the class group chat. After all, our points just got transferred this morning. Kushida's group was quite active, along with Onodera, Nishimura, Inogashira, Azuma, and Wang or Mii-chan as most of us call her.

"Good Morning." Chabashira-sensei waltzes in as the bell's sound was heard all over the campus. "Listen up, students of Class D."

All of us smiled in anticipation before Sensei continued.

"Or should I say... Class B?"

Chabashira-sensei slowly uttered those words, as the expressionless look on her face changed into a small smile.

Each student had different reactions, but they were all positive in their own ways.

"Alright!" Ike and Yamauchi couldn't help but yell out.

A lot of the girls gleefully celebrated as they smiled at their friends. Sudou and I looked at each other and exchanged our usual thumbs-up.

"Congratulations. I'm sure the other classes are desperately wondering how you managed this feat, but it doesn't matter." Chabashira-sensei smiled as she plastered a poster on the blackboard using some magnets.

"Sensei... Are these the results... for each class?" asked Hirata.

"Yes, Hirata. As you can see, you guys jumped up by two classes. You're only a couple of hundred points behind Class A." Chabashira-sensei answered with a smile.

The points listed were as follows:

Class A(A): 940 cl

Class B(D): 720 cl

Class C(B): 650 cl

Class D(C): 490 cl



"Dang... They really aren't Class A for nothing, huh?" Okitani murmured.

"That's crazy! They, like, didn't even know about the S-System but still managed to maintain such a high score?!" Karuizawa exclaimed.

While we were happy about our results, we can't help but be amazed by Class A's staggeringly high number of class points.

"You were all judged with the same set of rules. I guess this is a good wake-up call to see how all of you differ from Class A. But of course, none of you can be called defects now." Chabashira-sensei was smiling, but her expression turned grim right after.

"However, let me remind you... Right here is what you may call a fluke," she said in a deep voice, pointing at our score.

With that, a lot of the students in Class B stiffened.

"Ayanokouji single-handedly brought you here. You might as well be in the low hundreds if it weren't for him. Remember, you were all sorted in this class because the school judged your defective traits as something not worthy of the higher classes," explained Chabashira-sensei.

This was exactly why I opted not to reveal my entrance exam results to the class. Horikita and Yukimura's results were a stark contrast to the argument that it supports. Finally, Sensei was sternly revealing that our assortment wasn't strictly based on our entrance exam results.

After she spoke, Chabashira-sensei plastered another poster on the blackboard. We immediately knew that it was the results of the test last week.

"Unlike Class A, there are quite a few students in this class who clearly struggle in their academics," she said. "The exam had 20 questions in total. Each one was 5 points worth. Your class average is 71.5, which means that the passing grade was 35.75 or 36 points."

Chabashira-sensei drew a red line across the bottom part and addressed one student.

"Sudou, you scored 35 points, which means that if this were a real test, you would've been expelled," Chabashira-sensei said coldly.

Everyone was looking at Sudou with concerned looks.

"I... I understand." Sudou was visibly frustrated. Being singled out must've been humiliating.

Since the passing grade was dependent on the class average, we can conclude that the point distribution was evaluated based on that. After all, passing grades would normally be fixed, or based on the batch average. The class average was usually just for show...



That's not the case in this school where classes compete with each other.

I made eye contact with Kushida before we subtly nodded to each other.

"It's alright, Sudou-kun! I'm sure you'll improve later on!" said Kushida.

"Yeah, Ike and Yamauchi scored 40 points, which meant that they were only one question ahead of you!" added Onodera.

"Hey! What's that about, Onodera?!" Ike protested with a surprised look on his face.

"Yeah, don't just diss us out of nowhere!" Yamauchi did the same.

"Well, it's true though. But that aside, this wasn't a real test. At the end of the day, we got good results for our class points. Don't sweat it!" Karuizawa joined in and rallied the other girls.

"Yeah, we even got promoted to Class B!" followed Ichihashi.

"Let's just do better in the midterms, Sudou-kun!" Mori said in turn.

Most of the class voiced out their agreement. While I do think they're just being half-genuine, they helped maintain Sudou's, and by extension, the class's morale.

I turned to Chabashira-sensei and she looked back at me with a smirk, indicating that she knows what I'm doing. Her expression told me that she wasn't willing to spoil my plan.

Sudou didn't expect the supporting voices of our classmates. Of course, that was exactly my plan, using Kushida as the matchstick to light the fire. Chabashira-sensei could've easily ruined this atmosphere by telling them to shut up, but she decided against it.

Sudou looked at me with a confused and flustered expression, to which I responded with a nod.

"My bad... I'll try to get better results next time." Sudou scratched his head with a slightly stressed expression.

I guess that ended well...

"Alright, listen up." Chabashira-sensei finally spoke. "Your midterms will be in three weeks. So try your best to prepare for that. Make sure to listen properly to your teachers. I'll leave the results in here so you can mull over them."

Chabashira-sensei turned to Hirata.

"Hirata, remove this before your next teacher arrives. Give them back to me later in the faculty office."

"I understand, Sensei." Hirata nodded respectfully.

Chabashira-sensei briefly organized her belongings, as she was getting ready to leave. Before she walks out of the classroom, she turns to me with the same smirk.

"Good job, Ayanokouji. I'm looking forward to your performance



in the future," she said, not giving me a chance to reply as she closes the door.

You don't have to tell me that.

When Sensei left, almost everyone got up from their seats to look closer at the results. Horikita and I stayed in our seats. It was visible from the back anyway, so she must've been satisfied with what she's seen earlier.

"You really got a perfect score..." Horikita said with a grave voice.

"I--" Before I could reply, a wave of students approached my seat.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're amazing!" Satou got to me first.

"You really are the class's genius! You got all of those super hard questions right!" said Mori.

Looking at the results, I was up there, sitting alone at the top with 100 points. Three people were tied in second place, scoring 90 points. They were Horikita, Yukimura... and Kouenji. I see. His academic abilities are amazing as well. The three of them managed to answer one of the difficult questions.

It's too bad since we probably can't assign him as a tutor.

Not long after, even Hirata and Kushida approached me.

"Incredible job on getting a perfect score, Ayanokouji-kun," Hirata said with a smile.

"Yeah, you guys as well. Getting 85 points was probably the limit for most students, even those of Class A," I replied.

"But you got a perfect score, didn't you? Which means you're waaay smarter than them!" Kushida joined in.

"Those questions were really hard, you know? I had to use up a hundred percent of my brain just to answer one of them." I responded in a joking manner.

"Don't lie to us, Ayanokouji-kun. 15 minutes didn't even pass before you finished the exam. You must've thought that the questions were too easy, right?" said Matsushita.

Uh, I think you just dug your own grave on that one, Matsushita...

"Ehhh? How did you know, Matsushita-san? You must've been staring at Ayanokouji-kun the whole time!" Karuizawa immediately pounced at her.

"E-Eh?! N-No! What I meant was I was the same! I finished the test in 15 minutes, but of course, I skipped the last three questions since they were too difficult! And 15 minutes was just my personal time, anyway. Who's to say that Ayanokouji-kun didn't actually finish the test in 10 minutes?" Matsushita tried to salvage the situation.

However, it was futile. Karuizawa and Shinohara did nothing but give her smug looks.



"Now that I think about it, you're quite smart, aren't you, Matsushita-san? You were tied with Kushida, Hirata, Mii-chan, and a few others, scoring 85 points. If you finished the test in just 15 minutes, you must be an academic achiever."

I always looked at her as someone who didn't like trouble, similar to me. Since I now know her academic capabilities, I'll capitalize on them. This is a little payback for her attempt in shaking me up psychologically.

"That's..." Matsushita smiled bitterly, which I found to be extremely amusing.

Horikita came in at the perfect time to rescue her.

"Ayanokouji-kun, I think it's a good time to discuss our plans about the study groups," Horikita said, approaching my crowded seat.

"Horikita-san is right. We probably can't go into details since our time is limited, but at least we can set up a meeting schedule with everyone." Hirata agreed, his words instantly taking over the atmosphere.

With their initiative and quick thinking, I'm sure everything will go smoothly.

Our one-time card is now destroyed. It's up to us to maintain this foothold...



## Vol. 1: Chapter 10.1 - Retreat

On April 16th, the Friday of the second week, I was in my room with four other people. I've gathered them all here right after class.

"Horikita, Kushida, Hirata, and Karuizawa-san, thank you for sparing some time for me," I said.

Right now, Hirata and I were sitting on chairs facing the bed. The three girls were all sitting on the bed itself.

I'm surprised that Horikita isn't sitting distantly from her seatmate, Kushida. And even if Karuizawa was the one beside her, I predicted that she'd do the same. It seems like her tolerance for the types of people she dislikes has grown a lot.

"Of course, Ayanokouji-kun. You wouldn't gather us like this if it wasn't something important." Hirata replied with a gentle expression.

I can tell from Karuizawa's eyes that she's struggling. On one hand, she can't act like her true self because only Hirata and I know of it. On the other hand, she can't act as bullish because she shows she'll butt heads with Horikita, which would waste our time. At the same time, she can't act too out of place... Kushida will definitely pick up on that.

Right now, it's too dangerous to share her secrets with Kushida. Firstly, she doesn't trust her. And secondly, she might become an enemy, given Horikita's early warning.

I've been investigating Kushida's movements for the past week and unfortunately, I haven't found anything concrete just yet.

"Can I ask what I'm doing here? I can, like, understand why you called Hirata-kun, Kushida-san, Horikita-san, but I'm not a capable student like them." Karuizawa feigned ignorance.

"That's a reasonable question, Karuizawa-san. Well, I actually called you all here not because of your capabilities as a student. What I'm after are your social skills," I answered.

"Huh? Do you want us to teach you about social skills? You can talk to others just fine, right?" Karuizawa responded.

"Karuizawa-san, I think Ayanokouji-kun is referring to something else. Why don't we let him finish?" Kushida wryly smiled as she talked to her.

"Hmm, fine then." Karuizawa finally decided to start listening. Pristine acting, if I may say so myself.



"First, I would like to ask you one thing." I looked straight at them before uttering my question. "Do you think I should lead the class?"

They didn't react strongly but instead opted to think about the question. After a brief moment of pondering, Hirata was the first one to speak.

"I... think you should lead the class, Ayanokouji-kun. Your qualities are very excellent. If someone deserves to carve a path for our class, it should be you," said Hirata.

"I think... I agree with Hirata-kun. I'm not the smartest person in the class. Both Hirata-kun and Horikita-san are more academically capable than I am. But... if Ayanokouji leads the class, I'll do my best to support him as a close friend." Kushida said with determined eyes.

I remember the words that Horikita once said to warn me. Just how real were those eyes, Kushida?

"Isn't it fine? Ayanokouji-kun's, like, super smart and super athletic. Nothing can go wrong if he becomes the class's leader." Karuizawa joined in with a shrug.

"I have no complaints. If Ayanokouji-kun can bring us to Class A, then I'll do my best to cooperate." Horikita finally gave her verdict.

"I see," I sighed softly before continuing. "Then I'll issue my first command to all of you."

"Eh? Immediately?" Kushida asked with a genuinely surprised face.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I want the four of you to lead the class for me."

Well, for now, at least. Depending on how the other classes respond, I'd gladly take my position back.

An awkward second of silence ensued, but Hirata saved me from my suffering.

"Care to explain what you meant by that, Ayanokouji-kun?" Hirata asked with a bitter smile.

When I looked at everyone's faces, I only felt more embarrassed. Kushida wore the same bitter smile as Hirata. Karuizawa's face was serious on the surface, but I noticed that she was actually trying to hold her laughter. Meanwhile, Horikita was just glaring at me.

"W-Well... You see, I lack presence, and I want to take advantage of that. After this month, classes will officially start competing against each other," I explained. "I don't mind being in the limelight, but I think it's more efficient if I work from the shadows... at least for now."

"I see..." Hirata already has a clue of what I'm talking about from when we discussed Karuizawa's matters. But, of course, he also feigned ignorance for her sake.



"So you're saying that you want to avoid attention from other classes?" asked Horikita.

"Similar to that. I'm not exactly trying to avoid attention itself. What I'm trying to do is avoid getting targeted early," I replied.

"Targeted? By who? And how would they *"target"* you exactly?" asked Karuizawa.

"Of course, you can make basic schemes like breaking the rules and throwing the responsibility to someone else. In this case, you'd choose a rule that would result in the suspension or expulsion of a student," I answered.

"T-That's horrible!" commented Kushida.

"Who would do something like that...?" Hirata asked with knitted eyebrows.

"I don't know... but I'm just trying to lock everything down. I'm not saying that I want to stay *"safe"* on my own, while you guys become my scapegoat. That's just a terrible way to interpret this plan," I explained. "In fact, I don't actually mind being targeted. I believe I can fend off any scheme attempts given the right amount of time and preparation. I'd gladly take the lead role along with their crosshairs on me in the future. However, we can't be naive."

"I think I get where you're going, Ayanokouji-kun," Hirata spoke. "You want us to lead the class for you and act as decoys at the same time. Meanwhile, if any of us gets targeted, you'll do everything to stop the assailants yourself. Am I right?"

"Exactly," I nodded. "It's easier for me to ruin the enemy's plan if he's not aware of my existence. And it's not just about some cliché schemes... The biggest unknown factors for us, are the special exams... Those are what I'm most worried about."

Hirata caught on fast. It was also my way to check if any other class had that knowledge.

"Certainly... We know nothing about it yet. If the midterms and final exams can get us expelled, it's not a stretch to think that these special exams can do the same..." added Horikita.

"That's definitely scary..." Kushida said with a frown.

"As Horikita said, if anyone in the class gets targeted, I'll do everything I can to protect him or her. I won't let anyone get expelled on my watch. Meanwhile, I'll trust you guys to temporarily propel the class forward using your own abilities," I nodded lightly.

"In other words, you'll put us in charge of the offense, while we leave the defense and counterattacks to you," Hirata concluded my plan using an analogy. "For now, at least."

"I'm glad you understand what I'm trying to achieve here. Of course, while no one's getting targeted, I'll do my best to assist you guys from the shadows."



For a brief moment, the four of them contemplated everything that they just heard.

"I'm all for it. I'll follow your plan, Ayanokouji-kun." Hirata agreed with a smile.

"I'm the same! We'll follow your instructions in the future as well, Ayanokouji-kun!" Kushida exclaimed.

"Don't overwork me, 'kay?" Karuizawa shrugged with a grin.

When we looked at Horikita, she did nothing but nod in agreement.

"Alright, I guess that's it, huh?" I stood up. "It's still just a little after four o'clock. I'll treat you guys to some drinks in Pallette."

"If you want to thank us, then there's really no need, Ayanokouji-kun. But if you're asking us as your friends, then I'm in," replied Hirata.

"Yey! We get to hang out!" Kushida celebrated.

"There's no reason to refuse some free drinks, is there?" Karuizawa said with a smile.

I turned to Horikita.

"Do you want to come with us?" I asked.

"I appreciate the offer, Ayanokouji-kun. But, I'm afraid I'll have to decline. I have something else to do after this. Please enjoy yourselves," Horikita replied with a sigh.

"Ehh? It would've been fun if you come with us, Horikita-san!" Kushida pleaded.

"Maybe next time, Kushida-san," she declined with a cool expression. "Well then. I will have to go first. This has been a productive meeting, Ayanokouji-kun. Thank you for letting me participate."

Fortunately, she turned Kushida away without a hint of hostility or hate. Of course, I doubt she feels the same on the inside. It must've been really hard for someone like Horikita, who's everything but two-faced, to pull that off.

"See you, Horikita. See you on Monday," I waved.

After everyone exchanged their goodbyes with Horikita, she finally left.

"Well then, I think we'll have to change our clothes first. Let's meet up at the lobby around 4:30 PM. Is that alright?" Hirata, with his superior social skills, instantly whipped up a schedule like it was perfectly natural.

"Okay!" Kushida nodded enthusiastically.

"Sure!" Karuizawa did the same.

I nodded in agreement. The three of them finally left after we exchanged our own *"see you later"s*.

After taking off my uniform, I lay topless on my bed. It's



unusually warm-- Oh right, Horikita and the other two were sitting here just a little while ago... Somehow, remembering that made my heart race. It should be a normal reaction for a high school boy like me, right?

I noticed slight changes in the shape of my own body. I traced my fingers along the lines of my arm muscles and torso.

"My physical condition is slowly getting back to its peak. Those morning exercise routines seem effective," I murmured aloud.

Of course, it's still nothing compared to my physical fitness regimes back then.

With those fleeting thoughts, I got back up and prepared to leave.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 10.1.2 - A Tease

April 16, 8:00 PM. I was currently on a phone call with Karuizawa Kei.

After we finished talking about the events that happened at Pallette, Karuizawa suddenly burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! By the way, Ayanokouji-kun, what the heck was that earlier?" she asked.

"By earlier... You mean our meeting, right?" I tried to confirm my suspicions.

"Yeah! I tried my best not to laugh, you know?" Karuizawa replied in a haughty tone.

"Well, I thought it would sound natural. The conversation went exactly as I planned, too," I explained.

"Hahaha! It's your tone! Your tone! *"Then I'll issue my first command to all of you."*, *"I want the four of you to lead the class for me."* Hahaha! That was hilarious!" Karuizawa continued laughing. "You totally sounded like a mafia boss! Even I felt some second-hand embarrassment from that!"

I didn't know if her impression was accurate, but it totally didn't sound good from a listener's perspective.

"It's my tone, huh?" I murmured.

"Yeah. Like, if you had the same tone as Hirata-kun, for example, then we wouldn't have felt awkward with your words. One of us might've immediately asked you why. It's a good thing that Hirata-kun shifted the atmosphere for you," Karuizawa explained.

"I see..." The atmosphere was too friendly. If I was threatening someone, then those words combined with my tone would've been more effective.

"Well, I only found it funny because I noticed your expression as well as everyone's reactions. The most amusing one was Horikita-san's. She didn't get your implications immediately so she might've thought you were playing around. Her glare was quite scary, you know?" she chuckled.

"Sigh... Thanks for elaborating on my shameful mistake."

"Sure, sure!" She was in high spirits, having the upper hand in our conversation.

Just like that, Karuizawa continued trying to tease me. After she was satisfied, we continued talking about some other stuff.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 11.1 - The Start of the Cold War

*(22:03) [Are you alright with the students I assigned?]*

*(22:03) [I'm open for suggestions.] (Horikita)*

*(22:03) [Not at all, Horikita-san.]*

*(22:03) [I think they're perfect.] (Hirata)*

*(22:03) [I'm okay with the students assigned to me.] (Mii-chan)*

*(22:03) [Same here!] (Kushida)*

*(22:03) [I think I'll be able to teach the ones assigned to me.] (Yukimura)*

*(22:03) [Yes.]*

*(22:03) [I have no complaints as well.] (Matsushita)*

Horikita just submitted the student assignments in the tutor group chat. She sure works fast.

"Ah..." I mumbled.

I was about to type my own reply but the sweat from my forehead dropped on the surface of my phone. I was currently doing one-handed push-ups while reading the messages in our group chat.

I sighed as I used the bed beside me to wipe the screen dry.

*(22:04) [No problems here, too.] (Ayanokouji)*

We had seven tutors, namely; Horikita, Kushida, Matsushita, Hirata, Yukimura, Mii-chan, and me. Four students were assigned to Horikita, Matsushita, and me. The rest were to teach five.

The four students assigned to me were: Sudou, Sakura, Miyake, and Hasebe.

I instructed Horikita to assign Sudou and Sakura to me, but I left the other two in her hands. Miyake and Hasebe, huh?

They're both pretty quiet. They don't tend to hang out with others that much. I've seen them together once, so at least they know each other.

On a side note, it was also my instruction to have Kushida teach Ike and Yamauchi.

*(22:07) [Any particular reason why you assigned Miyake and Hasebe to me?]*

I asked Horikita via text. It's also possible that she didn't have any reason at all, which would be fine too.

*(22:07) [Their grades aren't a problem though improvements are*



*welcome. But the main reason why I assigned them to you was their personalities, or at least my impression of their personalities.]*

*(22:07) [Those two usually keep to themselves. I would've assigned them to Hirata-kun or Kushida-san, but some other students would be more effective to be in their slots.]*

Or so she explains.

In short, they're students that don't need any immediate help. She assigned them to me so I can give Sudou and Sakura some extra attention. How considerate of her.

*(22:08) [I see.]*

*(22:08) [Thanks for explaining, Horikita.]*

Well, I hope we can all get along tomorrow.

It was already past nine o'clock. I decided to head down for a drink. After putting on some clothes, I reached the first floor and headed for the vending machine right outside the lobby.

"Oh?" A beautiful girl wearing a light pink sleeveless top with a sky blue ruffle frill skirt uttered as she leaned on the wall beside the vending machine.

"If it isn't Ayanokouji-kun~!" Ichinose Honami raised her hand to greet me.

"Good evening, Ichinose," I greeted back.

This is the second time that we're talking to each other directly. I'm glad she remembers my name.

"It's quite late. What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I could say the same to you," I replied.

I found it weird from the start. She wasn't drinking anything. And even if she just recently finished her drink, she wouldn't be leaning on the wall with such a melancholic expression.

"Ahaha! I was just catching some air. The nightly breeze is quite relaxing, you know?" she answered with a grin.

"I see. I came here to grab a drink, and like you, I also planned to catch some air," I replied as I approached the vending machine beside her.

"Oh, is that so? Care to hang out with me for a bit then?" she suggested with a soft tone.

"Sure," I replied. "Want one? My treat?"

"Oh, sure. One matcha tea please," Ichinose replied, raising a finger.

After getting my canned coffee, I got Ichinose her matcha tea. I sat on the edge of a small concrete garden bed in front of Ichinose. She eyed my drink for a brief second before turning to ask.

"Do you know what I was thinking about, Ayanokouji-kun?" Ichinose asked with the same soft tone while opening her can.



Her usual happy self wasn't so apparent right now.

"If I were to guess, you must be thinking about the revelations on the S-System earlier," I asked before sipping my coffee.

"Ahaha... I guess it's a pretty obvious answer at this point. The class was in momentary chaos when everything happened. We never knew... that the S-System worked that way. And more importantly, we'd be branded as failures if we don't graduate in Class A..." she narrated.

"Yeah, it's pretty ridiculous," I commented.

"Right?! But Class D--" Ichinose looked down apologetically. "I'm sorry, I meant Class B... You guys are amazing. You jumped up two classes and overtook us."

They were the closest class to reach Class A but got overtaken after one month. Despite its negative effect on her own class, Ichinose didn't treat me with spite or hostility. She genuinely complimented our class instead.

"I guess we were lucky," I said.

"I could just praise how well-behaved your class is... but after Hoshinomiya-sensei explained to us how the sorting worked, it just didn't seem logical. Was there someone in your class who convinced everyone to refrain from violating the rules?" asked Ichinose.

"Hmm... If I were to think of the people who can do it, I'd say it's Hirata and Kushida," I answered.

"Oh, Kushida-san is certainly someone who's capable of doing that. And I also know about Hirata-kun. He's from the Soccer Club, right? A lot of the girls in my class are talking about him. If he's also a capable leader, then I guess it makes sense that he's so popular."

I nodded in agreement whilst drinking my coffee.

"How about, you Ayanokouji-kun? What are the things you're good at?" she asked.

"Hmm... I don't think I'm good at one thing in particular. If I were to think of something off the top of my head... I guess I'm good at running." It should be a pretty solid answer since it's also what I said in my self-introduction.

"Ohh~. Quite athletic, aren't you? We have someone who's good at running, too! His name is Shibata Sou-kun. He's in the Soccer Club with Hirata-kun," narrated Ichinose.

"I see. Given that he was assigned in Class B from the start, he must be innately better than me," I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

"Hmm~? Aren't you just being humble?" Ichinose bantered before asking a question that spelled my doom. "Oh! Now that I remember-- When we had swimming class, a few weeks ago, the teacher said that someone from your class finished the 50-meter



freestyle in under 22 seconds!"

"Oh... That." Since our topic was about sports, I guess this wasn't out of the question.

"Yeah! It's too bad that the teacher couldn't give us the exact time or the name of the student because of the school rules." Ichinose said before turning to me with a smile. "Do you know who it was, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Well, if I wanted to achieve the best out of this conversation, running away would do me no good.

"It would be good for my class if I didn't tell you. You'd know who to look out for if ever there's a competition on sports," I replied.

Ichinose's expression change into that of shock and surprise.

"Oh... That's certainly reasonable. We're all against each other now, after all. I'm sorry for asking," she smiled.

However, I can also tell she's genuinely sad. Even if she had the hidden agenda of finding out the abilities of our class, it was evident that she just wanted to have some fun conversations with me. The competitive nature of the S-System hinders that.

"That's what I'd normally say, but you've told me about Shibata already. It wouldn't be fair to you if I didn't answer your question," I said.

Ichinose became flustered with my words. She must've thought that I felt some sort of guilt, which wasn't the case at all.

"No, no! You don't have to tell me if you think it's not beneficial to your class. Moreover, I babbled about Shibata-kun out of my own volition. You earned that information, Ayanokouji-kun." Ichinose hurriedly justified what I said in the beginning.

She's a really good person.

"It's fine, Ichinose. None of my classmates would really mind if I'm the one who tells you, anyway," I said.

"Eh? So you mean to say..." Ichinose caught on pretty fast.

"Yeah, I was the holder of that swimming record," I said, before drinking the rest of my coffee.

Well, so much for trying to avoid attention.

"Eh?! Seriously?! That's insane, Ayanokouji-kun!" Ichinose was visibly shocked, her gestures and expression; almost exaggerated. She'd spill some of her drink if it wasn't nearly as empty.

"I think I was just feeling it that time," I said.

Saying something like *"it was a fluke"* would just be humble-bragging at this point. My record was just too fast for that.

"W-What was your exact time? Is it alright if you tell me that?" Ichinose said with a nervous expression as if she was bracing herself.



"If I remember correctly, I think it was 21.91 seconds," I replied.

"You say you were just feeling it, but you nearly broke the world record... Ayanokouji-kun, are you that good at something else? Or are you just a swimming monster?" Ichinose asked with a big smile.

"Hey hey, you already got what you wanted. Don't go sniffing for more information," I joked.

"Ahaha! You might possibly be the most athletic student in our year! It's a shame that we'll be rivals," said Ichinose.

"Yeah," I replied, putting my empty can in the trash bin. "Let's head back, Ichinose. It's getting really late."

It was almost ten. It would be bad if we get spotted together at this point in time.

"Oh, you're right," Ichinose replied as she lightly patted the back of her skirt after getting rid of her own can.

We talked some more before the elevator stopped on the 4th floor.

"Thanks for hanging out with me, Ayanokouji-kun. See you tomorrow." She gently waved her hand goodbye.

"Same here," I replied.

Finally, I entered my room and thought about what happened.

Lying to Ichinose was the worst option I could take at that moment. After all, she has other means to find out the truth. So, I just turned the situation around by giving her the information in exchange for trust. As much as possible, I would like to become allies with Class C.

They would make a good shield against the new Class D, who have no choice but go on the offensive. That way, we can focus on taking over Class A.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 11.2 - A Different Environment

"Yo, Ayanokouji. It's finally time, huh?" Sudou approached my seat.

After class ended, we showed the study group assignment to everyone. Of course, Kouenji strolled out of the classroom with his usual smile. After nodding to Sudou's words, I see the other three students assigned to me, approach awkwardly.

"Hey there, Sakura," I waved my hand. "Miyake, Hasebe, nice to meet you."

"Uh, Ayanokouji, you all said it was alright if we didn't attend the study group, right?" Miyake asked while scratching his head guiltily. "I don't really plan to ditch, but I have club, so getting a perfect attendance isn't possible for me."

"That's no fair Miyacchi! You have a club pass," pouted Hasebe.

Miyacchi? So they're close enough that Hasebe calls him using a nickname? That's quite surprising.

"I don't really mind. We're doing this to increase your exam scores, but it's still completely optional. It's also the same for you, Hasebe-san. It's alright if you don't attend. If you can study on your own, then by all means," I replied.

"Ah, I was half-joking about that, Ayanokouji-kun. Besides, I'd feel guilty if everyone else is working hard to get high scores while I'm sitting there with my average scores." Hasebe looked away before muttering. "I guess I just prefer spending my time alone."

"I have club too, Miyake, but I took some time off. Don't you wanna do the same?" Sudou asked curiously.

"Hmm... I don't think I need to, at least not for this midterm," answered Miyake.

"Huh. I guess that's reasonable. Since I got a failing grade from last time, I need more time and effort to study."

"Well, whatever your decisions are, I'll respect them. But if possible, I'd like all of you to give your best in this exam," I said.

"Of course! Let's get those 100 class points!"

At least Sudou was enthusiastic about studying. I never would've imagined that when I first met him. They all looked at him with wry smiles. If he's motivated then I'd consider this a good start.



"Hirata and Kushida's groups are studying in the classroom along with some other groups. Do you guys wanna relocate somewhere?" I asked. "Sakura, do you have a place in mind?"

"Eh? Ah-- I-I don't particularly mind where we study..." Sakura, surprised that I addressed her, answered stutteringly.

"I want some peace and quiet. Is the library alright?" Hasebe suggested.

"I'm up for it," Miyake nodded immediately.

"Sure, I guess," followed Sudou.

I looked at Sakura and both of us nodded to each other. Alright, I guess it's the library then. They often play classical music in the background so it's quite relaxing for me, too.

Luckily, the corner-most table on the back wasn't occupied by anyone. After laying down our notes on the table, I began to distribute a bunch of papers.

"I prepared these questions for you. I'll see how I should teach you guys based on the results." I turned to Sudou. "Yours is a bit nonstandard, Sudou. Since you're lagging behind, I'll teach you differently than the others."

"I see... Gotcha!" Sudou was quite confused but that's fine.

As I listened to Mozart's Salzburg Symphony No.1, their pens danced on top of the paper I gave them.

After 20 minutes, they submitted their answers and braced themselves for my evaluation.

"Hmm... This is interesting. Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun, your scores on each subject are almost identical..." I said.

"Huh? Seriously?" Hasebe asked with a shocked expression.

"Yeah. Both of you got above-average scores in the sciences, but near-failing scores in language and history. You even got the same questions right and wrong..." I explained.

"Urk-- I don't really know if I should be happy about that, given the second part," Miyake said with an awkward tone.

"But isn't that crazy, Miyacchi? We're totally the same," commented Hasebe.

"Sakura, your scores are well-distributed. You're not particularly bad at any subject but you need to improve all of them at the same time," I said.

"Oh..." Sakura reacted meekly to my evaluation. "I'll... I'll try my best."

"And for you, Sudou. I got some bad news," I said.

"B-Bad news?!" Sudou reflexively yelled.

"Shhh!" Miyake and Hasebe shut him up at the same time.

"My bad!" Sudou apologized whisperingly, which almost sounded



like a hiss.

"Sudou..." I built it up as Sudou gulped in anticipation. "Your fundamentals are only at the primary level."

When Miyake and Hasebe heard it, even they couldn't help but slam the table in surprise. Their reactions were quite amusing. The blatant disbelief on their faces surprised even Sakura. At the same time, Sakura was also in shock with my evaluation of Sudou.

"Seriously...?! Dang... I guess slacking off in studies finally bit me in the ass..." Sudou clicked his tongue in frustration.

"It's fine, Sudou. I'll try my best to improve your score, at least enough to prevent you from failing."

"Yeah... I'm counting on you, Ayanokouji."

"Alright, for now, I'll give you some pages to study while I create a new set of test questions for Sudou. After that, we'll review what you've remembered and pick up our pace from there. You guys fine with that?" I asked.

All of them nodded in response. Good, we got some nice coordination going on here. If we keep going at this speed, we'll definitely make it in time for the exam.

After a couple of hours have passed, our group finally finished today's quota. When we stood up after preparing to leave, we noticed that the library was almost full. As I thought, it was a popular place when the exams are right around the corner.

I checked the time and saw that it was 5:56 PM. The five of us walked through the hallways as the sun set slowly, dying the floor with a shade of orange.

"Phew! Oh man, that session sure melted my brain!" Sudou said with a huge grin.

"Seriously dude? You were answering questions for 6th graders. How the heck did that melt your brain?" Miyake bantered.

"It can't be helped! And besides, you're bad at Japanese too, you bastard!" Sudou countered.

"You guys are getting along quite well. Not bad for the first day." I said.

Their heated conversation didn't look like it'll turn into a fight, but I'll prevent anything from happening regardless.

"Well, they're both blockheads. It's natural for them to get along." Hasebe haughtily made fun of them.

"The hell'd you say, Hasebe?! Just you wait, I'll get a better score than you and Miyake in Japanese!" Sudou snapped back.

"Hey, isn't that a bit cowardly? Why don't you compete with us in the sciences too? You choose; Math, Chemistry, or whatever." Miyake crossed his arms with a smirk.



"That's unfair! I'm bad in all subjects, so I can only possibly beat you guys in subjects that you're bad at as well!" Sudou argued.

"Hmph, fine. Let's accept the challenge, Miyacchi. Let's grab a bunch of points from Sudou while we're at it!" Hasebe smiled. "So, how many points are we betting?"

When he heard that, Sudou shut up for a brief second, looking quite intimidated.

"5,000 points..." Sudou said with a glare, but his tone was pretty tame.

"Hmmm~? Why not 20,000? or maybe even more?"

"Tch, alright, fine. 10,000!" he replied.

"Deal!" Hasebe and Miyake called it instantly.

"Ayanokouji! Make sure I score perfectly on Japanese!" Sudou looked back at me.

"That's up to you, idiot," I replied.

"C'mon, man! Back me up in here!" Sudou desperately looked for an ally.

"Well, if your motivation stays like this, you'll have a high chance of beating them," I said.

"Oh~! The class genius has calculated your odds, Sudou! Be happy!" joked Hasebe.

"Heh! I knew it, I had the potential!" Sudou smirked, clenching his fist in excitement.

The combination of those three turned out to be surprisingly lively. If Sudou's reputation in the classroom wasn't like this from the beginning, I doubt the two of them would converse with him so openly.

"How'd you find our session today, Sakura?" I asked the girl who was walking beside me.

"It was alright... I was a bit scared at first, but Sudou-kun turned out to be a pretty good guy-- Miyake-kun, too."

"You can tell? You just met them for the first time, though," I asked.

I thought Sakura was the type of person who needs more exposure towards a person before she can open up to them. If she easily judged Miyake and Sudou, then it might not be the case at all.

"I can... actually tell if a person can be trusted just by looking at their eyes," she said. "You know when you look at someone's eyes and it feels odd-- like there's something different behind those eyes? That's how I feel a lot of the time... even if the person seems kind on the outside."

"Is that how it works?" I tilted my head.

"I-I can't really explain it... I've judged people like this since I was



young. Most of the time, people's eyes scared me. That's probably why I can't talk to people, and more than that, I can't look at them in the eye..." narrated Sakura.

For the duration of our study session, I had Sakura seat next to Sudou, using my lesson plan as an excuse. Since they had the chance to talk, then it must've worked well. Of course, I made it so Sakura can converse with Hasebe and Miyake, too.

"I see... So Sudou and Miyake's eyes were that of the *real* good people?" I asked, to which Sakura sheepishly nodded in agreement.

"Your eyes are also like theirs, Ayanokouji-kun... Kind and gentle..." Sakura added with a slight blush. "Miyake-kun doesn't talk much, but he's pretty vocal when he's comfortable around the people he's with. Sudou-kun was a bit scary, but he's kind to those who are kind to him... Ah- and of course, Hasebe-san was kind to me, too."

I'm impressed. Sakura's perception is a lot better than I thought. She's surprisingly a good judge of character. That said, I think she can just sense if a person has an ulterior motive. It's probably the reason why I'm in the red. After all, I wouldn't really classify myself as "*kind*".

"Sakura, haven't you noticed? You're talking normally with me right now. You're even looking at me in the eye. If you can keep doing this, then you'll make more friends in the future," I commented.

"Eh-? Ah--... I-I hope so... It would still be really hard for me though..." Sakura looked down and muttered. "After all..."

Her voice was so soft that it would've been impossible to hear and understand if I didn't try hard enough. Is she hiding something...?

When we reached the shoe lockers, I stopped in my tracks to say goodbye to them.

"I'll be heading back to check on the other study groups," I spoke loud enough for the four of them to hear.

"Heh~? Come hang out with us, Ayanokouji-kun! These two idiots are just about to fight!" Hasebe called out to me while pointing at Sudou and Miyake.

"Don't fight, or I'll beat you up myself," I jokingly said.

Hearing my words made Sudou flinch.

"Tch-- Miyake, let's stop. I ain't scared of anyone... but Ayanokouji will probably pummel me." Sudou softly whispered to Miyake.

He was genuinely nervous.

"Wha-?! Seriously? He's *that* strong?" Miyake was reasonably shocked, but he didn't doubt Sudou.

"You guys are exaggerating..."

"Sakura-chan, come! Let's head back to the dorms together!"



Hasebe waved her arms to Sakura.

"U-Uhm, thank you for today, Ayanokouji-kun! See you tomorrow," Sakura bowed gratefully.

"Yeah, be sure to listen to the new lessons," I said, gently waving my hand goodbye.

"Later, Ayanokouji-kun!" yelled Hasebe.

Sudou and Miyake waved at me, as well.

I'm glad everything turned out fine. I had fun, too.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 11.3 - Where One Belongs

The next few days of our study sessions went smoothly. We even had joint sessions with Horikita and the others. Their progress was fairly similar to ours. Hirata was especially glad that everything was going well.

Before we knew it, it was already Friday. Miyake was supposed to be absent to attend his club, but I managed to slip in a suggestion.

"How about this? Miyake and Sudou can go attend their club activities. We'll move the schedule from 3:30 PM to 5:00 PM. It's alright if you're a bit late. We'll have the meeting in my room if that's alright with you guys?" I asked.

"Oh, seriously? Alright!" Sudou exclaimed in joy.

"That's fine with me! I'll be there as soon as possible. C'mon, Sudou, let's bolt," replied Miyake.

"Bye-bye~!" Hasebe enthusiastically gave her farewell.

"Alright, I'll see you two later. I live in Room 401, so just knock when you get there," I said.

"Oho~? Didn't you send them away so you can have some alone time with us girls?" teased Hasebe.

As she said those words, memories came back to me... Hasebe Haruka and Sakura Airi; the two girls in Class B who were said to have the biggest... *breasts*.

"Not really. You can do whatever you want for the time being," I replied.

"U-Uhm, I want to hang out with Ayanokouji-kun!" Sakura looked like it took everything she had just to say that.

"Oh, you're surprisingly forward, aren't you, Sakura-chan~?" Hasebe turned to target Sakura this time.

"I-It's not like that, Hasebe-san... I don't really have anything else to do right now... So maybe we can do some extra studying?" Sakura's flustered expression probably looked adorable to Hasebe so she started clinging onto her.

"Hmm... You know what, I'll come with you. I'm worried that Ayanokouji-kun might do something *bad*." Hasebe smirked at me with a dubious look.

I'm really glad they got closer to each other. It's probably a great thing for Sakura to have a female friend as soon as now. I'm getting slandered, though.



"I won't..." I sighed in debility.

"I... I don't think Ayanokouji-kun is that kind of person..." Sakura spoke up to defend me. I'm thankful.

"Ahaha~, I'll still come along. At this point, let's just go have a study session. It'll help my competition with Sudou-kun, too." Hasebe chuckled deviously.

"Okay, let's go then," I said.

When we got to my room, Hasebe instantly jumped on my bed. I'm a bit flustered by her actions, but I'm happy that she's getting comfortable around a guy like me. Sakura looked around with a slightly baffled expression.

"Woah, are you sure this wasn't a vacant room? You haven't touched anything at all!" scolded Hasebe.

"I don't really need any decorations for my room or anything. I'd rather save my points," I replied, earning a weird look that says *"What the heck?"* from Hasebe.

I started gathering the study materials for them. I moved the small coffee table near my bed so we can begin our session. Using cushions, the three of us sat and got ready.

"Wait!" Hasebe raised her hand out of nowhere.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"Isn't this weird? Instead of studying, why aren't we using this time to get to know each other better?" Hasebe suggested. "Don't you agree, Sakura-chan?"

*You're* the one who suggested a study session, though...

"Uhm... Well, I think... that's also a nice idea," said Sakura.

"I thought you wanted to get ahead against Sudou?" I asked.

"W-Well, I guess I'll cut him some slack." She crossed her arms with a half-confident expression.

We've been studying properly for the past week. If they wanted to take a break by doing this, then I guess I'll allow it.

"Sigh... Fine, I'll indulge you on this. Is there anything you guys want to talk about?" I started the discussion.

Hasebe instantly looked interested. Meanwhile, I saw Sakura's expression brighten up a little.

"Hmm, why don't we start from the top? I'll go first. My first impression of Ayanokouji-kun was a quiet genius-- intellectually, that is. And I almost hit the mark... until he whipped out his ridiculous athletic abilities." narrated Hasebe. "For Sakura-chan, I always thought you were the kind of girl who would curl up when talking to people, and I was kinda right, I guess."

Hasebe looked at me, indicating that it was my turn. Well, here goes...

"I guess my first impression on Hasebe-san was a quiet girl, and



man was I wrong on that," I said.

Annoyed by my answer, Hasebe lightly punched my arm with a cute glare.

"I guess most of the people in our class have the same impression on Sakura. You always kept to yourself ever since the start of our year, right?"

"R-Right..." Sakura smiled bitterly.

"But it turns out, you can be also quite talkative," I finished.

"Oh, you're right! We chatted a ton about cosmetics and clothes the other day! Sakura-chan was quite knowledgeable about them." Hasebe excitedly told the story.

"I-It's not that big of a deal..." Sakura became flustered as she tried to deny her knowledge of fashion.

Sakura has been described as "*plain*" by the likes of Ike and Yamauchi. If she's knowledgeable in fashion, then...

"Well, that aside, it's your turn, Sakura. Let's hear it." I passed the baton onto her.

"Uhm, okay. Well, I always thought of Ayanokouji-kun as a smart person ever since he saved the class on the first day. I was surprised to find out that he wasn't good at talking to people, like me. But, he's a very reliable guy." Sakura spoke with a smile.

"Ohh~? Is your heart racing, Ayanokouji-kun. Even my heart raced a bit." Hasebe tried to tease me as payback. It didn't really work, though.

"A-Ahh... Uhm-!" Sakura panicked after recalling everything that she just said.

"Well, I'm thankful for Sakura's words. It feels nice to be in the same boat as someone," I replied.

That was probably the only way for Sakura's embarrassment to disappear. She'd lose it even more if I act too affected.

"Well, Sakura-chan? What about me?" Hasebe pointed to herself with eyes of anticipation.

"Uhm, at first, I was a bit intimidated. But I didn't think Hasebe-san was such a friendly person." Sakura continued. "I-It would be nice... if we could be friends-!"

"Eh?" Hasebe uttered with a dumbfounded look.

"Eh?" Sakura parroted.

"Sakura-chan... Aren't we friends already?" Hasebe asked while scratching her cheeks.

"Ehh?!" Sakura gasped in surprise.

"Ahahaha! I wouldn't act this closely if I didn't think so, you know?" Hasebe laughed.

The atmosphere got pretty lively. We proceeded to talk about Sudou and Miyake afterward.



Some time passed and I became Hasebe's target once more.

"Oh! Now that I have the chance to ask, Ayanokouji-kun... *Who* is it?" Hasebe asked with a suspicious smile.

"Who is what?" I looked visibly confused.

"Huh? I'm obviously asking about the girl you like." Hasebe rolled her eyes.

That question, huh? Even Sakura perked up and paid attention. Well, it wouldn't be girl-talk without love as the topic. It's unfortunate that I was dragged into said girl-talk.

"I don't see anyone that way," I replied flatly.

"Eh? Not even a crush? You got Kushida-san, Horikita-san, Matsushita-san, or practically every girl in Class B to choose from excluding Karuizawa-san... Wait, scratch that. If I'm gonna be honest, I think you can even go for her if you want."

She just suggested that I could steal Karuizawa away from Hirata. They're just pretending to be a couple, but wouldn't that be rude if they were truly a couple?

"Even if that's true, I don't really have anyone I like right now. Besides, we're just in the second month of the school year," I rebutted.

"What do you mean?! Not that I support it or anything, but a lot of the students confessed on the first day, you know?! The first day!" Hasebe refuted back.

Well, even I was aware of that. I even saw some students confess their feelings for Kushida at some point. Of course, they got rejected nicely.

"H-Hasebe-san, you're getting too heated about this." Sakura tried to calm her down.

"Sigh... You're right. But it just seemed unrealistic for Ayanokouji-kun to not have a crush on anyone when he's so close to such cute girls," she shrugged.

It does seem suspicious, but I can't really do anything about it now, can I? It would be much more of a problem if I drop a name.

I don't even know what the concept of love is apart from its textbook definition.



## SS.2 - Ayanokouji Kiyotaka Fans (1)

**Group Chat Name:** A.K. Fans

Total Members: 6

Males: 0

Females: 6

**Class Distribution:**

A: 0

B: 6

C: 0

D: 0

**Names of Members:**

- 2M1I1 (Admin)

- A2S

- DeKai

- Sawako

- Memento

- Nika0

**Chatroom:**

[Ayanokouji-kun was so handsome today, too!] (A2S)

[I know right!]

[I'll never get tired of looking at his face from my seat!] (Sawako)

[I'm so jealous of Hasebe-san!]

[I want Ayanokouji-kun to teach me too!] (A2S)

[I'm satisfied with my assignment, but getting taught by Ayanokouji-kun would be something else!] (Memento)

[But more than that, I want to know more about him!]

[He was super fast during swimming!] (DeKai)

[I feel the same!]

[I feel like he's becoming more and more mysterious.] (Nika0)

[Ehh?]

[Aren't you already so close to him, Nika-san?]

[You told us about it last time.] (2M1I1)

[That's true!]



[I even thought you'd ask him out at some point!] (DeKai)  
[Ahaha...]  
[You'd easily find out who I am if I did.]  
[I'd be too embarrassed to act normally, no matter what the result is.] (Nika0)  
[Haha!]  
[I get that!] (Memento)  
[But still, a lot of girls just started swarming him, you know?]  
(Nika0)  
[I mean, isn't it just natural?]  
[Like, Ayanokouji-kun is just too good for Class B, anyway.]  
(2M1I1)  
[True!]  
[He's super handsome, super smart, and super athletic all at the same time!]  
[If he established himself outside the class, his popularity would increase by leaps and bounds!] (Memento)  
[Wouldn't it be harder for us to approach him then?] (A2S)  
[It'll be fine! We have the "*classmate*" advantage!] (Sawako)  
[There are strong competitors from other classes though, like Ichinose-san, for example.] (Nika0)  
[That's true!]  
[She's super popular!] (2M1I1)  
[She's really beautiful and has a great figure.]  
[I've talked to her once before and, oh my god, she's such a nice person.] (Memento)  
[Meanwhile, I can't even talk to him without blushing every other second.] (A2S)  
[Same.] (2M1I1)  
[His mature calmness is just too manly, even for me.] (DeKai)  
[Ahh~!]  
[I want to hang out more with Ayanokouji-kun!] (Sawako)  
[He's such a mystery, isn't he?] (Nika0)  
[That's part of why he's so cool!] (2M1I1)

### **Additional Group Chat Settings:**

- Screenshots: Disabled
- Clear Cycle: Every 24 Hours, 6:00 AM

### **Membership Settings:**



- Male: Invite-only
- Female: Visible to all



## Vol. 1: Chapter 11.4 - The Ayanokouji Group

Finally, I heard a knock. Two guys greeted me when I opened the door.

"Yo," Miyake raised his hand.

"Yo," I replied with an imitation.

Miyake high-fived my palm lightly as he walks in.

"Sup, Ayanokouji." Sudou follows with a grin.

"How was it?" I asked, closing the door.

"It was a'ight. The seniors were surprised when I appeared, but they welcomed me to practice regardless." Sudou narrated.

"Oh, you two are already here?" Miyake commented, seeing Hasebe and Sakura on their seats.

"Nope. We were here the whole time, hard at work!" Hasebe replied with a smug grin.

"Hmm... Maybe I should buy a larger table..." I muttered while looking at our cramped state.

"Eh? You don't have to do that, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakura.

"Yeah. We can just use your dining table, anyway." Sudou added.

After we arranged our things on the dining table, the study session officially started. As expected, they were improving steadily. I've hammered a lot of fundamentals onto Sudou for the past week. Combined with his motivation, he finally reached the level of a second-year middle schooler.

"Hnnn~..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

After an hour passed, Hasebe stretched her arms with a rather feminine moan. Even in our periphery, the movement of her bountiful chest was noticeable. As guys, Miyake, Sudou, and I couldn't help but become conscious of her. After all, Hasebe was an extremely attractive girl. We tried our best not to lose eye contact with our papers. Reacting in any sort of way would mean instant death, hence we maintained our stone-cold expressions.

"Well, why don't we take a break and grab something at the convenience store?" Hasebe suggested.



"O-Oh, good idea," replied Miyake.

"Y-Yeah, I was gettin' kinda hungry, too." Sudou also agreed.

It was 6:30 PM. The five of us were clad in our uniforms as we headed out of the building. After buying what we wanted, our group walked slowly back to the dorms.

"Three sandwiches? What a glutton..." Miyake criticized Sudou's purchase.

"Shut up, Miyake! I told you I was hungry, didn't I?!" Sudou immediately got pissed off.

"This is yummy! Here, Sakura-chan. Have a taste." Hasebe handed her ice cream to Sakura.

"A-Alright... You can have a taste of mine, too." Sakura happily returned the favor.

At the moment, everything seems to be going well... Not just about our group, but my high school life in general. I have friends, and we're all working together towards a goal. If I'm gonna be honest, I've had more fun in the last one and a half months here than I ever did for the past fifteen years inside the White Room...

"What's with that look, Ayanokouji-kun? You want a taste of our ice creams, too?" teased Hasebe.

"If you want to have some of mine, just say it. You don't have to tease me like that," I replied.

"W-Wha-?! I didn't expect you to be such a self-conscious guy, Ayanokouji-kun!" Hasebe glared at me.

"Heh. 'You think I didn't notice? You were agonizing between choosing the flavor you bought and the one I bought. C'mon, Hasebe-san. Your motives were clear from the start," I teased back.

This was the first time I've ever tried to tease someone without stopping at the first exchange. Seeing Hasebe fume in silence, I guess it worked well.

"Grrr-! Your stupid monotone voice and deductive reasoning are making me look like the villain here!" Hasebe's mad expression was amusing, but she skillfully shifted them into something else.

"Sigh... Fine, you win this time, Ayanokouji-kun." Hasebe replied with an expression of defeat before swiftly grabbing my ice cream cup. "Now let me have some!"

In the end, the four of us, including Miyake, tried out each other's ice creams while Sudou munched on his sandwiches.

When we were nearing the dorms, Hasebe suddenly leaped ahead before facing the four of us.

"You know, I always thought I'd stay distant from you guys even with this study group thingy," narrated Hasebe. "I'm sure I would stay as a loner if I was assigned to Hirata-kun or Kushida-san's study group. But here, I felt really comfortable after a few days. Hey,



Miyacchi! don't you feel the same?"

"Yeah, I get what you're saying. Hirata and Kushida-san---... they're just on another level, I feel. Well, I thought Ayanokouji would be the same, but he turned out to be a pretty chill guy." replied Miyake.

"Heh. Ayanokouji sucks at talking with girls, you know? Hey, don't you deny it, Ayanokouji! You always ask for my help whenever girls invite you out!" Sudou shouted at me.

"I'm not. It's the truth, after all. Thank you for always helping me, mister smooth operator Sudou-sama," I replied while shrugging my shoulders.

"Heh!" Sudou snickered, thinking that I genuinely complimented him.

Miyake and Hasebe laughed out loud in response. Even Sakura chuckled a little.

"Well, my point is... Why don't we make this group an official friend group? Apart from Ayanokouji-kun, all of us were just a bunch of loners, anyway."

"You're wrong on that, Hasebe-san. Despite my position in class, I'm just like you guys. You can consider me *"a loner who's noticed by everyone"* if that makes sense," I explained.

"Now that I think about it, you're not really in any other group, ain'tcha?" Sudou mused. "You get along with Kushida's group and Hirata's group, but I don't really see you stick with them."

"Their social skills are too high, after all. I just can't keep up," I said.

"Isn't this perfect then?!" Hasebe exclaimed with a smile. "From this day on, we shall be called 'The Ayanokouji Group!'"

"Does it have to be my name?" I asked.

"Why not? You're the one who brought us together, right?" Miyake poked me with his elbow.

"Do you mind being in this group, Sakura?" I turned to Sakura, who was quietly watching things unfold.

"Not at all." Sakura shook her head. "I'm happy to be part of this group."

"Oh! I'm getting all giddy and excited! Why don't we change how we call each other as a first step?" Hasebe advocated. "Miyacchi, what's your first name again?"

"It's Akito," Miyake replied before turning to Sudou and me. "If I remember correctly, it's Ken and Kiyotaka for the two of you, right?"

Sudou and I nodded in unison.

"Alright, I'll call you guys by your first names. You can call me Akito in return," he smoothly relayed to us.



He's different from Hirata, but Akito is a pretty cool guy, isn't he?" "Sakura-chan, your first name is Airi, right?" Hasebe asked, inching closer to Sakura.

"Yes... Please correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't yours Haruka?" Sakura tilted her head with a smile.

Airi and Haruka, huh? Those are nice names.

"Oh! You remembered! I love you, Airi!" Haruka exclaimed, hugging Airi tightly.

Both of them were beautiful girls blessed with healthy developing bodies, so it's only natural for their sizeable chests to collide when one embraces the other. The three of us instantly looked away to avoid having any awkward thoughts.

"Ken... I feel like punching Kiyotaka right now. He's too calm," said Akito.

"Yeah, same. Just where is he hiding all those nerves?" Ken agreed.

"That's not it, you two. It just doesn't show on my face," I replied.

"That's a pretty useful face then." Ken bit back.

"Hey, you oafs!" Haruka called out to us. "I have an awesome idea! I'll call you by nicknames!"

"N-Nicknames?" Ken was surprised. He was obviously alien to the idea of nicknames, or at least those given by friends.

"Yeah!" Haruka grinned.

"Kiyotaka will be... Kiyopuu...? Kiyopoyo...? Hmm... How about Kiyomaru?" Before I could protest, Haruka raised her finger like she had a eureka moment. "Kiyopon! Your nickname will be Kiyopon! At the same time, Miyacchi will be Miyacchi, and Ken will be Kenchin!"

Well, there goes the first nickname I ever had. Kiyopon.

"Why the hell am I a vegetable soup (Kenchin-jiru)?!" Ken yelled in retaliation.

"Just deal with it, Kenchin! It's cute, isn't it?" Haruka's decision didn't seem like it could be changed.

"You didn't even change mine..." Akito complained.

While the three got noisy, I turned to Airi, who was smiling warmly at them.

"It's nice to meet you again, Airi." I exchanged courtesy.

"Same here... K-Kiyotaka...-kun..." Airi replied with flushed cheeks.

A friend group, huh? I guess it wouldn't be bad to have a place you can return to from time to time.

When we got back into my room, we used the remaining time to sum up everything we've learned thus far. As expected, their scores increased by quite a good amount. Akito and Haruka are pretty



much ready. They'll just have to prepare for the new lessons now. Airi needs a bit more improvement, but with our current pace, her results were more than enough. Lastly, I can probably prevent Sudou from failing at this point, but I'll try to improve his performance if time permits it.

After they all left, I talked with Hirata and the other tutors via group call. After hearing everyone's reports, we all sighed in relief with how well our class is taking this midterm exam.

Amidst all the positive events happening around me, I muttered a question that was probably brought on by that place, the White Room's effect on my way of thinking.

"I wonder when things will start to go wrong?"



## Vol. 1: Chapter 12.1 - You Can Change

The following Monday night, I was finishing the study materials for the new lessons when I heard my stomach growl lightly in hunger.

"I could cook something, but I don't wanna sleep too late. 'Guess I'll just buy something at the convenience store..." I murmured to myself.

When I arrived on the first floor, I saw Horikita, still dressed in her uniform, walk out of the building. That's strange...

I didn't really need to hide. I can just call out to Horikita, but I decided to hide my presence and follow her anyway. The place around the building was well lit, but she headed to a very inconspicuous place. After Horikita's sharp turn, I sensed another person with her.

"Suzune. I didn't think you'd follow me this far." A male voice could suddenly be heard.

I remember this voice. I've heard it before...

"I'm not the useless girl you once knew, Nii-san. I'll eventually catch up to you," replied Horikita.

Nii-san, is it? Well, that confirms my suspicion.

My instincts were telling me to stay hidden. His figure was hidden in the dark, but I'll be discovered if I try to move a muscle.

"Catch up to me, huh...? I heard you were placed in Class D, but you got promoted to Class B this May. That's certainly impressive," he commented.

"Yes, I'll definitely reach Class A," said Horikita.

"Hmph, you got arrogant after a fluke? Then, tell me Suzune. Were you the reason for your class's achievement? Were you the one who prevented the defects from falling apart?" he asked.

"I..." Horikita wavered. Her confidence instantly took a hit.

"As I thought. It's pointless, Suzune. You neither have the abilities nor qualities to reach Class A. Even if, by some miracle, your class reaches Class A in the future, I'd doubt the contribution you've given," he elaborated.

"That's not--..."

The person stepped closer to the docile Horikita and his appearance became clear from my hiding spot. It was Student Council President Horikita Manabu, Horikita Suzune's older brother.



She tried to protest, but the elder Horikita grabbed her by the wrist. Horikita got pushed into a wall without any resistance whatsoever.

"The fact that you're my little sister remains. I would be humiliated if people learn that my own little sister is nothing but a defective failure. Leave this school immediately," he coldly ordered.

"I-I can't do that... I'll definitely reach Class A with my own abilities! I'll... I'll prove it to you!" she petitioned.

"How stupid..." The change in his grip was visible. This is dangerous.

I approached them as fast as I can. Before he could do anything, I grabbed his right arm and made my presence known.

"What? You..." He stared at his arm and slowly turned to me with a sharp gleam.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun?!" cried Horikita.

"You were about to throw your sister to the ground, weren't you? You do realize that the floor here is concrete, right? You might be siblings, but you should know the difference between right and wrong." I said.

"Eavesdropping is not an admirable quality," he replied.

"Fine, then let go."

"That's my line."

We glared at each other in complete silence.

"Stop it, Ayanokouji-kun..." said Horikita, her voice strained. This is the first time I've heard her voice like that.

Reluctantly, I released her brother.

?!

He instantly tried to backhand me in the face. I took a step back to avoid it. For such a lightly built guy, he was a nasty attacker. He then aimed a sharp kick at my unguarded spot, which I barely dodged. His attacks show that he's well-versed in karate. Even I can feel the impact of each blow, and they didn't even hit me.

He looked slightly confused but this wasn't the time to act passively. I had to get Horikita away from him. I dashed forward and released a teep kick to his waist. I made it fast but predictable. Horikita Manabu could easily dodge it, but he'd have to leap away from his sister.

"Hmph."

Contrary to my expectations, he didn't dodge but instead went for a Nikyo. He knows aikido, too. When he caught my leg, I used the extra momentum to elevate myself off the ground, twist my body, and kick his head with my other leg.

"-?!"

Horikita Manabu got caught off-guard, so he had no choice but to let go of my right leg and dodge the left. He leaped back and fixed



the position of his glasses. He looked at me with a smirk.

"You move excellently. Do you practice something? Taekwondo? Muay Thai? Karate?" He bombarded me with questions. Those martial arts are reasonable deductions. After all, I only used kicks.

Well, I guess that was over. At least, I have Horikita behind me now.

"Yes, I was taught piano and calligraphy," I replied. "I won a national music competition during elementary school, as well."

"You're in Class B, aren't you? What a unique boy, Suzune." He addressed his sister.

"I'm Horikita's friend," I declared.

"A friend, huh?" To both mine and Horikita's surprise, Horikita Manabu had a genuinely shocked expression. "Is that true, Suzune?"

"He's..." Horikita was reluctant to say it. Somehow, that hurt.

"There you go again, confusing independence with solitude. That in itself shows just how much of a failure you are. And you, Ayanokouji... Were you the one?" he asked after scolding his sister.

"What do you mean *'the one'*?" I feigned ignorance.

"Hmm... Well, no matter. Things might just get interesting with you around." he said.

With that, Horikita Manabu walked past the two of us and disappeared into the night.

So that was the student council president of this school. His presence explained some of Horikita's weird behavior.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Yes..." she answered meekly before turning to me. "Did you hear... everything?"

"I think so. When I went down, I saw you walking suspiciously. I was kind of curious so I decided to follow you. I'm sorry if I meddled in your business. That wasn't my intention," I replied.

"It's... fine," Horikita muttered softly before falling silent. She leaned against the wall, looking down on the ground.

"Your brother was really strong. He doesn't lack ferocity." I tried to salvage the conversation.

"He's ranked fifth dan in karate and fourth dan in aikido," she replied.

So it was those two, after all. What a strong fighter.

"You also practice martial arts, don't you, Ayanokouji-kun? You must hold a dan rank."

"I told you didn't I? Just piano and tea ceremony."

"You said calligraphy before," she glared slightly.

"I... did calligraphy in addition to those." It's true, though. If there were a piano here, I could probably perform "*Für Elise*" for her. I'm pretty confident with the other two, as well.



"Why don't you just tell me outright? What's the point of hiding it?" she snapped.

"Fine, I do practice martial arts. Just a little bit."

"After seeing those movements, you don't seriously think I will believe that, do you?"

"If I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me anyway," I replied, turning away from Horikita.

"So you're saying that the truth is on the same level as the one you told me regarding your academic abilities?" she mused. "After seeing you almost break a swimming world record and seamlessly ace the surprise mock test... I don't think I have any choice but to believe you now, do I?"

Then, Horikita's expression turned melancholic.

"You've told me that you don't like talking about yourself, and I respect that. I won't pry on your life if you don't want me to... But even I'd feel displeased if you blatantly lie to me. If you really don't want to tell me anything, at least tell me straight."

Hearing her plea, I sighed.

"Karate, muay thai, taekwondo, aikido, jiu-jitsu, kung-fu, judo... and some others-- I practice them all."

"That's..." Horikita braced herself for my ridiculous answers, but her shock couldn't be more noticeable. "How strong are you on all of them?"

"That's it. I refuse to tell you any more," I replied.

"I see... I understand, I'll stop asking now." Horikita sighed before looking back at me. "You saw a strange side of me."

"I didn't understand why you acted the way you did at first, but this coincidence opened my eyes to some stuff." I turned around and faced the direction of the convenience store. "However, you don't have to worry, Horikita. I'll definitely get you and everyone to Class A."

Horikita's eyes brightened as she looked at me.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"But remember what your brother said. Don't confuse independence for solitude. No matter how capable you are, you won't survive in this school without relying on your allies," I preached.

After all, even I wouldn't be able to do it alone.

"That's..." Horikita bit her lip.

"We've been seatmates and friends for the past month and a half. In my honest opinion, you can change, Horikita," I said before walking away.

"I'll... try my best, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll show my brother... and I'll show you... that I'm someone worthy of Class A," she declared.



Her fixation for Class A is both a strength and a weakness.

I continued walking without looking back, letting Horikita ponder her words while watching my fading figure.

*Author's Notes:*

*Nikyo is a technique in aikido for locking down your attackers. Look it up for more information.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 13.1 - Underneath That Mask

May 14th, Friday.

Days went on, and the students were embraced by nothing but normalcy. Some might say that the mundane life of a high schooler is boring, but I'd argue that it's the best. This was the peaceful high school life I was hoping for.

I checked the tutors' group chat to reread some of our conversations. Things got pretty dicey after Chabashira-sensei announced something earlier.

(18:46) *[How are things on your end?]*

(18:46) *[Is everything alright?]* (Hirata)

(18:46) *[Yes.]*

(18:47) *[I think everyone felt the same frustration as we did, but fortunately, they're still pretty motivated.]* (Kushida)

(18:47) *[That's a relief.]*

(18:47) *[How about the others?]* (Hirata)

(18:47) *[My group is fine.]* (Ayanokouji)

(18:48) *[Same here.]* (Yukimura)

(18:48) *[My group is also doing fine.]* (Horikita)

(18:48) *[So is mine.]* (Matsushita)

(18:48) *[Me too.]* (Mii-chan)

(18:49) *[I see... Really, that's a relief...]* (Hirata)

(18:49) *[But to think they'd change the coverage of our exam this late.]*

(18:49) *[It's pretty strange.]*

(18:49) *[There are only two weeks left.]* (Horikita)

(18:50) *[I'm sure all classes are on edge...]* (Kushida)

(18:50) *[I feel the same.]*

(18:50) *[But all we can do now is move forward.]*

(18:51) *[Let's continue our hard work, everyone.]* (Hirata)

(18:51) *[Alright, you got it.]* (Ayanokouji)

(18:51) *[I'll do what I can to improve them.]* (Yukimura)

(18:52) *[Yeah, I have Ishikura-san helping me too.]* (Matsushita)

(18:52) *[Yes!]*

(18:52) *[Nishimura-san has been a lot of help for me, too.]*

(18:52) *[She's so reliable that I sometimes forget I'm the tutor!]* (Mii-



chan)

(18:52) *[Fight on! We can do this! (ノ●ㄣ●)ノ\*]* (Kushida)

The Ayanokouji Group's session finished early. After saying goodbye to my friends, I walked back to the classroom and saw the other groups.

"Ayanokouji-kun!" Kushida stood up as soon as she saw me.

The rest of my classmates who were also present in the room greeted me. From their seat, I can see Ike and Yamauchi glaring daggers at me.

"How are your sessions going?" I asked.

"It's going great. All of them are still pressured by the sudden change, but we're being careful not to cram carelessly," Kushida answered with a smile.

I sat at the back of the classroom near Kushida's group. Taking out the study materials from my bag, I started coming up with new questions for Ken and the others. I can comfortably hear the discussions of Kushida's group with the distance I took.

"Kushida-chan is so smart! I can't believe that was the answer all along!" Ike praised her vigorously.

"With Kushida-chan teaching me, I can probably aim for a perfect score!" Yamauchi bragged on.

"Hey, why don't you two shut up for a moment? I can't focus over here!" scolded Shinohara.

Makida and Azuma just smiled bitterly as they continued what they were doing. Their reactions told me that this was a common occurrence.

"E-Everyone, let's get our heads in the game, okay? I'm not as smart as Ayanokouji-kun or Horikita-san, but I'll try my best to answer anything you don't understand." Kushida's wry smile rejuvenated Ike and Yamauchi's sour expressions.

"You've been doing that from the start, Kushida-chan!" Yamauchi said.

"Yeah! There's no way you ain't as smart as them! I can already feel myself getting infected by your intelligence!" followed Ike.

Some minutes passed and it was finally time to wrap things up.

"Good work again today, everyone! Let's talk about our plans this weekend so we can relax with efficiency. Is that alright with you all?" Hirata asked everyone in the classroom.

"Yes!"

"We can get to hang out during weekends again!"

"Yey~!"

Of course, everyone in the class acknowledged his words with glee. With Hirata's own abilities and charisma, getting the class to



act as one looked like an easy feat.

Finally, the only ones left in the room were Nishimura, Mii-chan, Hirata, Kushida, and me. We were all busy with making new sample questions to use for our next sessions. Kushida and I sat next to each other quite closely, to the point where our shoulders occasionally touched. I let her use my questions as references so she can finish her quota with speed. We chatted constantly like we usually did. If Ike or Yamauchi saw this, they would probably try to kill me.

"I'm finally done! Thanks a lot, Ayanokouji-kun! Your questions have been a huge help as usual!" Kushida thanked me with an angelic smile.

"No problem. Just tell me if you're having trouble with the tutoring. I'll help you anytime," I answered.

"Mn~! I'll be counting on you, Ayanokouji-kun! I'll head back to the dorms now," she nodded cutely. "Well then, I'll go ahead first! Hirata-kun, thanks for today, as always! Ryuuko-chan, Mii-chan, I'll see you tomorrow!"

And with that, we all waved Kushida goodbye.

I let two minutes pass, before standing up to head out of the room.

"I'll head to the bathroom for a bit." I gave the three of them a heads-up.

"Ah, sure, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hirata.

I checked the clock and saw that it was 6:39 PM. We asked permission to use the classroom until 7:00 PM, so we still had some time. I was looking out the window this whole time to check Kushida's exiting figure. She wouldn't go anywhere else but here if she really planned on heading back to the dorms. Also, two minutes was more than enough to reach the shoe lockers, change into our outdoor shoes, and exit the building.

It's the fourth time that this exact situation has happened. For the first three times, I checked every nook and cranny of the first three floors. I even spied near the girls' bathrooms to check if Kushida exits at some point. Now, there was only one place left to check before I could conclude that Kushida did indeed use the other exit on the opposite side of the building: The rooftop.

I ran as fast as I could without making any noise. When I finally reached the third floor, I heard the sound of footsteps going up towards the rooftop. If that was Kushida, she was either walking pretty slowly, or she briefly stopped and did something. Regardless, I decided to follow the person stealthily.

As expected, the door to the rooftop was opened by someone. Peeking through the small opening, I saw her approaching the edge.



It was Kushida.

"Finally... It only took 37 days before I might actually get something," I muttered softly.

I wondered if she got permission from anyone since the door was usually locked after school.

I can't possibly hear her from this far. I've confirmed that the door won't make a noise if I open it back when Horikita and I came here to interrogate Chabashira-sensei. Kushida wasn't facing my direction, so I decided to completely hide my presence with the help of the night's darkness and enter the rooftop.

For all I know, Kushida might just be here to catch some fresh air. The other possibility is that she's here to meet with someone. Should the case be either of those, I'll just head back without question and continue on with my life.

However...

I had it ready in case something else went on. I put all of my strength into hiding my presence. I stopped breathing entirely, to the point where the sound of my heartbeat was probably more noticeable than my entire body. It was a necessary measure considering that I was just a couple of meters away from Kushida, who was facing the nightly scenery of the campus.

And then it happened.

"Ahhh, screw this!" Even if her volume was loud, the tone was so low that it didn't sound like Kushida at all.

"They're so gross! They're seriously so damn gross! Always trying to ogle me, always trying to get close to me--!" Kushida grumbled as if she was trying to put a curse on someone.

"Your ulterior motives are so obvious you damned perverts! Ike and Yamauchi, you two should just die!"

Ike and Yamauchi, huh? I wonder how Kushida would react if she also knew of their wild fantasies about her.

"And that bitch Shinohara... Don't try to talk just because you're not getting praised, you minion! Go back to your co-lackeys and obey that head bitch Karuizawa!" she continued.

A part of me still wanted all of this to be a dream. After all, this was Kushida Kikyuu; the angelic sociable girl, the one who brought the class together with me and the others...

*And my very first friend.*

But of course, I had to accept reality because it was right before my eyes. For all I know, she might've just pretended to be my friend.

"Agghh! All of this is that damned Horikita's fault! She must have intentionally assigned those annoying people to me!"

She huffed and puffed as her voice came and went. The sounds



gradually dissipated into the air along with the hateful words that she freely let loose.

Kushida turned around and saw no one there besides herself. Or at least, that's what I expected to happen because I left the rooftop before she had the chance to do so.

I ran as fast as I could and returned to Class 1-B's room, letting my slightly ragged breathing get noticed by the students remaining inside. This should be more efficient. The lack of oxygen in my brain after holding my breath for so long combined with my full running speed took a bit of a toll on my body. Even if they ask me about it, I have a foolproof story ready.

"Ayanakouji-kun? You took some time in the bathroom, huh?" said Hirata.

"You're panting quite hard... Are you alright?" Nishimura asked, tilting her head.

I can also see Mii-chan looking at me with a concerned expression.

"S-Sorry... I had to run as fast as I could... I thought I saw something back there..." I narrated with a nervous tone.

"A-A-A ghost...?" Mii-chan asked with a terrified expression.

"Maybe... but to me, it was more like a demoness," I replied.

A demoness, huh? Now I started thinking... How should I deal with this demoness?

### *Author's Notes:*

*In the canon, Chabashira-sensei didn't mention the changes in topics until Horikita asked her about them. This resulted in them wasting a week's worth of studying. However, she mentioned it this time.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 14.1 - To Trust Someone

I successfully reached the 13th floor and made my way to Horikita's room. I rang her doorbell once and waited patiently. Some girls gave me curious looks as they walk past the hallway. I don't think I look suspicious or anything, but their stares still wracked my nerves.

Not long after, Horikita opened the door.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun. Please, come in," greeted Horikita.

"Excuse me for intruding."

Horikita's one-bedroom-and-kitchen room was minimally decorated like my room. I couldn't see into the bedroom area though.

"Have a seat," she said. "As you told me in your message, this will be about Kushida-san, right?"

"Yes," I replied, sitting on the chair she prepared for me.

I took out my phone and pressed the play button.

*"Ahhh, screw this! They're so gross! They're seriously so damn gross! Always trying to ogle me, always trying to get close to me--! Your ulterior motives are so obvious you damned perverts! Ike and Yamauchi, you two should just die!"*

*"And that bitch Shinohara... Don't try to talk just because you're not getting praised, you minion! Go back to your co-lackeys and obey that head bitch Karuizawa--!"*

At that moment, I paused the recording and faced Horikita.

I debated whether I should include her bit in Kushida's venting but ultimately decided against it. There's no reason to spark more hate between them.

"This..." Horikita narrowed her eyes.

She was smart, so hearing such uncharacteristic hate from Kushida's mouth meant that I had the means to record her. Horikita was probably wondering how in the world I was able to do it.

"To be honest, I was starting to doubt you. I've been suspicious of Kushida for more than a month now, keeping tabs on her movements almost every day. But it took me this long to finally get something. She hid her other self really well," I narrated.

In reality, I focused more on making friends and tutoring my classmates, so it was hard to put any time into this investigation.



And I really can't be too careful. Everything would've fallen apart if Kushida got even a small whiff of what I was trying to do.

"So, is this what you were talking about?" I asked.

"This... is also the first time I've ever heard Kushida-san speak of things like these. You should know that already. I told you that we didn't interact during junior high at all, didn't I?" Horikita replied.

"You're right," I murmured. "Sigh... Regardless, this is bad, isn't it?"

"Bad?" Horikita raised her eyebrow in suspicion.

"Hmm... It's fine. I'll do something about it." I stood up and got ready to leave.

"Wait, please tell me, Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita pleaded with a serious expression.

"Horikita, I need you to trust me on this. I'll give you an explanation once everything is over."

"You said that one person won't be able to do anything alone. I want to help you... however, I can."

I put my hands on Horikita's shoulder, which she didn't mind. Horikita continued looking straight into my eyes.

"I know you're anxious, and I appreciate your intention to help. But don't worry. I'll make sure everything's fine in the end," I replied.

"..."

Horikita was still conflicted, but she didn't talk back.

"Horikita, you're the only one I can fully trust right now. I'll be counting on you if I ever need assistance. So I want you to trust me, too," I said.

Horikita looked down to the side with a displeased expression.

"You say you trust me, but..."

Horikita decided to not pry on my background, but she will always question my identity in her mind. Of course, she was right to do so. If I was in her position, I can't simply trust someone so blindly. Especially if that someone possesses abilities that are way beyond my own.

You never know when you'll get used as a pawn or as a sacrifice, after all.

"That has nothing to do with my trust for you, Horikita. It's just a personal thing... I don't know if it will ever happen, but I hope I can open up to you some time," I said.

Horikita's eyes looked confused as they narrowed in vexation.

"Ayanokouji-kun... You say that I can sense what people think... but right now, as of this moment, I have no clue if your words are truth that I can wholeheartedly trust... or lies meant to manipulate me..." Horikita looked straight into my eyes.



She wants to trust me fully, but her instincts are telling her to take a step back and think again.

Horikita Suzune sees Ayanokouji Kiyotaka as an exceptional student. But, she also sees him as someone who's grounded by social norms-- someone who wants friends-- someone who wants to have interpersonal relationships-- someone who wants a normal high school life.

Horikita sees me as an exceptional student... but she also sees me as nothing but a normal person.

If I didn't display any of my abilities, I would've already fully gained her trust, but she wouldn't respect me, and will hardly listen to my opinions. But since I did, the opposite happened. Even if Horikita respects me, she can't trust someone whose capabilities and motives were unknown. It was a dilemma that I can't escape from. Thus, her doubt was completely justified.

"To manipulate you, huh...? Do you really think I would do something like that, Horikita?" I asked.

"I... I don't know... You scare me, Ayanokouji-kun," said Horikita.

"I scare you?" I asked.

"I can't really explain it myself..." Horikita's breathing was disorderly.

"I see... You know what, Horikita, let's end it here for now," I suggested, lifting my hands off her slim, feminine shoulders. "My decision is final. I will move alone this time. I'll see you tomorrow."

As I left Horikita with those parting words, I exited her room and tread back to my own.

***I'm sorry, Horikita. But I'm just an empty husk of coldness- a specimen of an experiment- a creation meant to win. I don't have compassion, nor do I abide by any established ethics. You, Hirata, Kushida, or everyone in Class B-- you're all nothing but tools for me, and I loathe myself for thinking that.***

#### *Author's Notes:*

*This is the crux of Suzune and Kiyotaka's relationship of trust and respect. If you can all remember, even though she criticizes him for being inferior and indifferent (y'know, the "I'm incompetent" and "I dislike trouble" stuff), Suzune still trusts Kiyotaka. However, Suzune started doubting Kiyotaka as a person when he started showing his abilities, combined with Chabashira-sensei's provocations. I mean, of course, just*



like how Keisei and Ken felt when they finally found out about Kiyotaka's abilities, you wouldn't trust someone whom you know is hiding something from you, right?

And the "trust" I was referring to when I said Suzune trusted Kiyotaka at the beginning of Volume 1 was, funnily enough, the same as Kiyotaka's trust for Kei-- only for different reasons.

As a basis, Kiyotaka "trusts" Kei because she was, at first, desperate about hiding her past. Kiyotaka made sure of this in the infamous "Spread your legs" moment. Of course, it later evolved into pure loyalty (due to Kei's own character development and her budding feelings for Kiyotaka). She was an effective tool for him.

Now, at the beginning of Volume 1, Suzune "trusts" Kiyotaka due to his "I don't like trouble" personality and his inferior capabilities. Suzune has repeatedly observed Kiyotaka's behavior and judged that he was good to have by her side as an ally (though of course, she only thought of him as an errand boy). The reason being Kiyotaka's lack of abilities, ambition, or motive to take advantage of her whatsoever. In other words, betrayal was near-impossible. He was an effective tool for her.

Of course, all of it crumbled down instantly when Chabashira-sensei hit her with that "I wonder. He may be even more intelligent than you, Horikita." line which really triggered her past arrogant self, at that time. That's where you can pinpoint the start of Suzune's doubts.

Suzune doesn't trust Kiyotaka as a friend or anything-- at least not yet. That didn't happen until the climax of Volume 3 where Suzune let it slip that she thinks of him as a friend.

Also, even if he was the same old awkward novice-conversationalist Kiyotaka, because of how socially active he was in this timeline, Suzune thought of him as someone like Hirata or Kushida; a person who genuinely cares about his classmates and friends, which of course, he isn't.

Lastly, think back on Suzune and Kei's conversation about how Kiyotaka trusts Kei more than her, at that point in time. Kei fully trusts Kiyotaka, so in return, he trusts her more than anyone else. Suzune stated that she, for the longest time, was afraid of fully trusting Kiyotaka because she was afraid that she'll witness something terrifying in the future and that she felt like she will get betrayed by him at some point (which is very probable).

Right now though, Suzune is still just feeling things on instinct. Since she doesn't know Kiyotaka that well, she cannot yet articulate her feelings of fear about Kiyotaka's potential betrayal.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 15.1 - Inviting The Wolf Into Another Wolf's Den

*(20:20) [Can you spare some time for me tomorrow?]*

*(20:20) [Ayanokouji-kun!]*

*(20:21) [Sure, what time?]*

*(20:21) [Right after the study session.]*

*(20:21) [Is it alright if you come to my room?]*

*(20:21) [I want to talk to you about something.]*

*(20:21) [Oh, sure.]*

*(20:21) [It's something important, isn't it?]*

*(20:22) [Yeah... and private too.]*

*(20:22) [Alright, let's head home together tomorrow.]*

*(20:22) [Okay.]*

*(20:23) [Thanks, Kushida.]*

*(20:23) [No problem! o( ^▽^ )o]*

If anyone were to read such a friendly conversation, they wouldn't be able to guess that it's actually the prelude to a potential war.

"Ayanokouji-kun!"

Kushida called out and waved at me as soon as I entered the classroom.

"Good morning," I replied.

Kushida went up to me and whisperingly said.

"About later... It'll be about the girl you like, am I right?" she teasingly asked.

"I... can't say anything right now-- too many people," I replied.

"Hmm~? That's suspicious, Ayanokouji-kun," she smiled sweetly.

"Hey! What are you two talking about?" yelled Ike.

He and Yamauchi walked towards the two of us with huge grins. And with that, I left Kushida to the two of them. Ike will surely scold me about getting in his way to Kushida's heart, or something. Of course, Kushida happily kept them company, even if she abhorred them deep inside.

It feels weird knowing Kushida's true-- Hmm... Now that I think about it, which even is Kushida's true self...? Well, 'point stands that she hates some of our classmates to the core. She might even hate me, too.



"Good morning... Ayanokouji-kun."

Horikita greeted me with a rather soft tone. It was quite the difference compared to her usual stern way of speaking. Horikita's current demeanor reminded me of the time when she was talking with her brother.

"Good morning, Horikita," I replied.

I hung my bag and sat comfortably.

"Is there really nothing I can do to help?" asked Horikita.

"Yes, I got it covered."

"I see..."

She looked pretty upset. Well, after Horikita Manabu berated her about not giving any contributions for the class's betterment, I can't really blame Horikita's insistence to help.

"Horikita, the best thing you can do to help me right now is to focus on what you're supposed to do," I said.

"I am. My study group has been functioning well and--"

"Are you friends with any of your tutees yet?" I asked, interrupting her.

"Friends? Why are you asking that?" Horikita's eyes narrowed.

"Oh, you're right. Sorry, that's none of my business. Let me rephrase the question. Are you at least on friendly terms with them?"

"I can't say..." Horikita pondered my question.

"What I meant by that is; are you at least criticizing them in a way that you won't hurt their feelings? After all, you're a very frank person, Horikita. You didn't hesitate to criticize me harshly back in April," I said jokingly.

"That's true... But those four... They're good students, in my opinion."

"Oh? Tell me about them."

"Hmm... Inogashira-san is having a hard time with the lessons in general, but she works hard to try and understand them. Okitani-kun is only a bit below-average across the board, so he's not that hard to teach. Mori-san and Satou-san act carefree most of the time but they are fairly capable when they put their minds into it," she narrated.

"I see, that's great then. Unlike what you've said before regarding students who don't do well in their studies, at least you don't look at them as dead weight anymore," I commented.

"I guess I was a bit short-sighted before." Horikita turned away, returning to her cool, composed self.

She doesn't really need to become friends with anyone nor does she want to, given her personality. She can even look at them as pawns if she wants. But of course, Horikita understands that



cooperation between classmates plays a big part to succeed in this school. That's a good starting point. It would only do more harm if I try to push any of my fake ideals about making friends on her.

When our conversation ended, I got up from my seat to hang out with Ken and Akito.

A little while later, Inogashira and Kushida approached Horikita so I decided to take a peek. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the gist of their conversation was pretty easy to get. Most likely; she wanted to ask Horikita something-- probably about the study session. But, Inogashira needed Kushida's company because she was either shy or intimidated by Horikita.

In the end, it seems like things worked out nicely. Horikita looked in my direction, probably sensing my gaze. I gave her a thumbs-up, but she replied with a glare before turning away. How cruel, I thought we were friends.

When the bell rang, classes went on as normally as they could. The Ayanokouji Group unanimously agreed to use the library for today. Akito and Haruka were doing well. Airi was slowly catching up to them. And finally, Ken reached the first-year high school level. Even if they were only about the most basic of fundamentals, I still consider it great progress. He won't have too many problems with learning the next-level stuff when we get there.

If I were to estimate their potential scores on the exam, Akito and Haruka would come out on top scoring at least 70 on their weak subjects and 80 or higher on their strong subjects. Airi would probably score at least 60 points for most subjects and Ken will surely hit the 50-point mark given his progress.

"Woah, I understand it so much better now! I love you, Kiyopon!" Haruka celebrated softly.

"Ehhh-?!" gasped Airi.

"Don't take her seriously, Airi. She's just being too casual with her thank you's." Akito said, clearing up a misunderstanding before it could form.

"O-Oh... So it was a friendly type of *I love you*! I see!" she nodded.

"Boys do that a lot, but it still feels weird when a girl says it..." said Ken.

"Do you respond with an *I love you too*?" I asked.

"Pfft-!" Haruka covered her mouth in laughter.

"Wow, that's some big-time loner question right there..." commented Ken.

"Get off me, Ken." I bit back with a deadpan face.

"I mean, you usually don't. But I guess you can for the sake of the joke," Akito replied while shrugging his shoulders.



"Oh, I see. Sorry for that weird question. I really just didn't know," I nodded.

"We know. But it's fine, dude. There's a first for everything," said Akito.

"Then, I love you too, Haruka... I guess." I tried to reply for the sake of the joke, just as Akito instructed.

The four of them stopped moving and looked at me. Akito and Ken had faces of pure shock while Airi was vehemently confused. Haruka, on the other hand...

"W-W-W-Wha--" Haruka's brain pretty much broke. Her face was red, too.

They misunderstood me again... Wait, no, it's different. I'm pretty sure that it's the fault of my dull tone again.

"I thought I could reply like that for the sake of the joke. My delivery ruined it again, huh?" I commented.

"Dang... You really just did that, didn't you?" Akito shook his head.

"It's really *is* your damn tone, idiot." Ken snapped at me.

I see. Maybe I should've smiled, but they would probably find that weirder. Hmm... Jokes really are tricky.

After analyzing the situation carefully, I can conclude one thing: I have made Haruka more conscious of me, albeit unintentionally. Since I sounded serious, Haruka couldn't help but get flustered even if she knew that it was meant to be a joke.

"Well, sorry about that, Haruka," I apologized.

"N-No, no... It's fine. I knew it was a joke, anyway... Yeah... A joke... Ahaha..." Haruka started talking weirdly, but as long as she understands, I guess.

Our study session continued with a slightly awkward atmosphere, and it was entirely my fault. Even after the air got cleared up by Ken's dumb antics, I could sense Haruka sneaking glances at me.

We finished up on time and left the library. When I saw my friends off, I went back to Class 1-B's room to pick Kushida up.

"Ayanokouji-kun! Let's go?" Kushida caught my arm.

"A-Ayanokouji?! What's this about?!" Yamauchi and Ike had exaggerated shocked reactions. Well, compared to the other girls who had the same reactions, theirs were pretty exaggerated.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun and I promised to head back together." Kushida was the one who replied. "We'll see you tomorrow, Sana-chan, Shinohara-san, and Makida-kun! Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun too!"

Kushida also took the time to give everyone inside the room a lively farewell. Of course, I did the same, even if it was the furthest thing from "*lively*". Hirata reassured us saying that he'll take care of



closing up. What a great guy. Meanwhile, Ike and Yamauchi looked like they were about to cry.

And with that, Kushida and I left the building together. There's no turning back now, huh? If things don't go as planned, I might as well become the person Kushida hates the most.



## Vol. 1: Chapter 15.2 - The Strings Have Been Tied

I checked my phone and saw a notification.

*[25,000 private points have been successfully transferred to your account.]*

*Received from: Horikita Suzune.*

Just in time.

"Do you wanna start talking about it, or should we wait until we get to your room?" Kushida asked with a smile.

"Let's just talk about it in my room. We might accidentally get heard out here... You never know. Someone could be eavesdropping from behind," I replied.

"Ahaha! There's no way! Look around us, the other students are merrily talking with each other. They wouldn't care about our conversation," she chuckled cutely.

"You're right... Well, for now, let's just talk about other things. How's your study session going?" I asked.

"Ohh. Well..."

Kushida and I started chatting about mundane school stuff. She shared a few interesting things about our classmates but they were useless gossip at best. But still, the fact that she knows this much just goes to show how wide Kushida's social network was. We talked about each other's day until we reached the dorms. Finally, the two of us exited the elevator and entered my room.

"It's been a few weeks since I've been in your room, Ayanokouji-kun," commented Kushida.

"Yeah, make yourself comfortable on the bed. I'll take a seat here," I said, sitting on the office chair in front of my desktop computer.

"So? Start spilling it~! I'm guessing that it's Hasebe-san or Horikita-san~! Or... maybe it's Sakura-san~?" Kushida happily started the conversation.

A small part of me is saying that I should just improvise the conversation and talk about girls instead. But of course, that's not possible at this point.

"Kushida," I turned to her with a serious expression.

"Y-Yeah?" Kushida acted like she was nervous while wearing an



adorable face.

"After this... I wholeheartedly hope that we can still be close friends..." I said.

Kushida finally sensed that something was off. I wasn't going to talk about some girl and plan a love confession.

"What are you talking about, Ayanokouji-kun? Is everything alright?" Kushida had a weary expression, but of course, she still had the same angelic attitude.

"It's alright, Kushida. You don't need to keep that face up right now."

When she heard those words, Kushida's pupils dilated in shock.

"Ayanokouji-kun... What's the problem? Why are you saying such things right now..." Kushida said with a concerned face.

Her incessant act didn't stop. She's determined to keep this up until the very last minute, huh?

"I'm just telling you the truth. Apart from the angelic and friendly girl that everyone loves, there's another side of you, isn't there?"

Kushida's eyebrow twitched and her lips trembled slightly.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. This is weird... What are you saying? This isn't like you!" Kushida's tone remained unchanging, but her composure started to crumble.

"Kushida... It's fine, really. You don't have to keep acting anymore," I said before continuing. "After all, I was there yesterday, when you let your feelings out at the rooftop."

*Snap.*

I felt something break inside Kushida. Her eyes, which were briefly hidden for a second, turned to look at me.

It was dark... and full of hate.

"You heard... everything?" Finally, Kushida addressed me in that deep and coarse voice.

"Yes, I heard your true feelings about Ike, Yamauchi, Shinohara-san... and Horikita."

"What do you want?" she asked me straight.

"I told you already, Kushida. I want the two of us to stay friends."

"Are kidding me? Are you that desperate to have me as a friend? I'm not the bubbly, perfectly kind girl that you know. I'm a two-faced bitch, right?! That's what you think, right?!" Kushida vehemently spoke with hate seething from her eyes.

"Whether you're a false saint, a hypocrite, or a fake, I couldn't care less."

"Oh? So you're one of those *"I'll accept you for who you are"* types? Are you trying to make me warm up to you? You want to be someone special to me? To be *"the only one who knows the true me"*? Is that what you're after? Hah, are you in love with me or



something?" Kushida mocked my potential motives. "Quit your fantasies. This isn't some rom-com manga."

Was peace never an option...?

"That's quite narcissistic of you, Kushida. Do you really think I care about any of those?"

"Heh, so what then? What the hell are you after? My body?" she said, scoffing at me.

"Why? You'll give it to me if I tell you to?"

"Dream on! What? You'll try to blackmail me? You think anyone will believe your words?!"

"Well, not all of them will believe my words. But what if I use your words?"

"Huh? What you...-?!"

*"Ahhh, screw this! They're so gross! They're seriously so damn gross! Always trying to ogle me, always trying to get close to me--! Your ulterior motives are so obvious you damned perverts! Ike and Yamauchi, you two should just die!"*

*"And that bitch Shinohara... Don't try to talk just because you're not getting praised, you minion! Go back to your co-lackeys and obey that head bitch Karuizawa--!"*

*"Agghh! All of this is that damned Horikita's fault! She must have intentionally assigned those annoying people to me!"*

I held my phone with the speaker in full volume. With the distance between us, Kushida wouldn't be able to reach me. Even if she suddenly tried to grab my phone, it's not like I won't be able to react in time.

Kushida listened in shock. At this point, her mind must be a mess. She's using every single ounce of her brainpower to peer back on her memories. When did it happen? Why didn't she see me? Those questions must've been running through her head.

"How...?" she asked. "How? How? How? How...? HOW?!"

At this point, Kushida glared at me in pure rage.

"I told you, right? You never know. Someone could be eavesdropping from behind," I answered.

"Do you think I'd believe that? I was there, alone! I saw no one other than me!"

"It's fine if you don't believe me. I just told you the truth. Or do you have any other explanation for this?" I asked, slightly raising my phone.

"Tch..." Kushida's glare was as nocuous as ever, but other than hate and anger, there was anxiety-- extreme anxiety. It's time for me to take advantage of that.

"Spread your legs," I commanded.

"What...?" Kushida asked nervously.



Since she was in a kneeling position, the inner parts of her thighs will be revealed bit by bit... until everything could be seen.

"I'm one tap away from sending this recording to our class's group chat," I threatened.

"Wait! Wait--!" Kushida yelled in a panic.

"So? Are you doing it, or not? While you're at it, remove your top, too," I said.

Kushida's eyes started getting moist. They remained in contact with mine, full of fear, hate, and regret.

Right now, Kushida Kikyou was nothing but a sheep who was caught between the fangs of a wolf-- helpless, scared... and in despair.

"So this is the true you, Ayanokouji-kun... You're worse than me, you fucking pervert. I'll absolutely make you pay for this..." Kushida slowly spread her legs. She cursed at me before touching her blazer's button. She was really going to take off her clothes.

"Stop," I said, interrupting her.

"-?!" Kushida was confused with my sudden order.

"I was testing you, Kushida. I was just trying to see how far you would go for your secret to stay hidden," I answered. "Now, I know that you hold your image, your status, and your reputation much more highly than yourself."

"Hah? What the hell do you want?! What's the point of all this?! Do you really think you can toy with me-- that I would follow every single one of your orders?" Kushida asked indignantly.

"Yeah."

"..." Hearing my direct answer, Kushida could only stare back tempestuously.

"I know something about you. You know nothing about me. It's clear who's in control," I said as a matter-of-factly.

"Just... tell me what you want... I'm sick of this..." Kushida looked down on her bare thighs.

Despair was taking over her. She's slowly resigning to her fate.

"I want you... to tell me everything about your past," I said.

"My past...?" Kushida asked in confusion.

"Yes. Specifically, *that incident*." Kushida stared back at me in shock. "What exactly happened? I want you to tell me everything in detail."

"Horikita... told you everything, didn't she?" she asked.

I see... Kushida was under the impression that Horikita knows everything. I guess I can try to take advantage of that.

"Yeah, but of course, the number of details she knew was lacking. That's why I wanted to hear it from the primary source, the main suspect herself," I said. "Lying isn't advisable, Kushida. Don't test



me..."

"Tch... Fine! I'll tell you! If I tell you everything, you'll be satisfied, right?!" she aggrievedly asked.

"Yeah, I just want to understand what really happened," I replied.

She stared at me in resentment before letting out a long sigh.

"Ayanokouji-kun... you're the best at swimming, right? Better than anyone else..." Kushida started with a question.

"Not really. I'm fast, but I'm not the best in the world," I answered.

"I see, but I'm sure you can still understand what I'm feeling. You're valued in a special way, right? You're better than anyone in this school when it comes to swimming. You're also probably one of the smartest students in our year. Everyone's eyes are on you. You know those moments when people shower you with attention?"

Of course, I understood. People naturally desired the approval of others. Working hard enough to earn praise for accomplishments was fundamental to how human society functioned.

"I think I'm probably addicted to that feeling," said Kushida. "More so than normal people. I can't help wanting to show off. I can't help wanting to stand out. I can't help wanting to be praised. Whenever people show how much they admire me-- how much they worship me, I can't help but think about how wonderful it is to be alive."

"But you can't be the best at everything," I commented.

"Yes, I know my own limits. No matter how hard I try, I won't be number one in academics or in sports, unlike you or Horikita. I absolutely, absolutely, *absolutely* hated losing. Coming in second or third won't satisfy my cravings. So I thought I'd do something that no one else could-- I'll be nicer and kinder than anyone else."

So that was the root of Kushida's kindness, huh? She wasn't a genuinely kind and helpful person who treats everyone nicely. She was a two-faced narcissist who manipulates everyone by acting perfectly good.

"Thanks to that, I became popular with both boys and girls. I took pleasure in being trusted and relied upon. Elementary school and junior high were really fun," she narrated.

"But aren't you forcing yourself to do things you don't want to?" I asked.

"Of course, I'm forcing myself. It's extremely agonizing. Day after day, I'm under so much stress I that feel like I'm going bald. I've pulled my hair out and vomited from anxiety. But I can't let anyone see that side of me. That's why I continued to endure, and endure, and endure," said Kushida.

"You couldn't possibly keep that up for so long, right?" I narrowed



my eyes, implying that I knew where this was going next.

"Heh, of course not. Horikita must've already told you, but my blog saved me. It was the only place where I dumped out my hidden stress. I could type all of my most painful secrets. Of course, I posted everything anonymously, you know? But I wrote the facts just as they were, and it made me so happy when I received encouragement from people I didn't even know. Then, one day, a classmate discovered my blog. Even though I hadn't named anyone, it was clear that my posts were all based on real events."

"I see, and that's how the incident started," I said, acting like I knew that much.

"Yeah, the next day, my posts were shared with the entire class. Everyone condemned me. I'd helped them so much, and yet they all turned on me. Selfish, right? The boy who'd told me he liked me actually shoved me. It was understandable, though, since I'd posted that his romantic confession grossed me out and I wanted him to die. The girl I'd comforted after she was dumped even kicked my desk. I'd posted in detail about why she was dumped and made fun of her. Over thirty students decided that I'm their mortal enemy that day," narrated Kushida.

I see... So that was how...

"And the only way to make it through... was by revealing every single ugly truth to everyone." Fortunately, that last bit was easy to figure out because Horikita knew the results of Kushida's actions.

"Exactly, I revealed all my classmates' secrets. Who hated who, who thought who was a disgusting creep. I exposed truths I hadn't even written on my blog."

Truth was a weapon that could only be obtained through trust. It might seem harmless, and even good most of the time, but depending on how a person uses the truth, chaos will be a possible outcome.

"At that point, my classmates stopped being angry at me and started hating on each other. The boys got into fistfights, the girls pulled each other's hair and shoved each other over. The entire classroom descended into chaos and complete anarchy. It was honestly incredible."

"Because of everything I exposed, the class could no longer function. The school rebuked me, but my blog was anonymous, and all I technically did was tell my classmates the truth." Kushida spoke indifferently, but every word she uttered carried weight.

"It was my mistake to use the internet to vent my feelings. Everything you put up there is saved forever. That's why I stopped blogging. Now, I blow off steam by saying what's on my mind out loud when I'm alone."



"Just like yesterday, right?"

"Yeah, I still don't know how you managed to record me, let alone hear me, but I can't deny the evidence," she shrugged.

"You didn't lie to me about anything, right?" I asked, leaning closer. I carefully observed Kushida's response.

"What the? I didn't! Are you kidding me?! You already know that I didn't!" she replied in a panic.

Her worry stemmed from hopelessness, not lies. She really did tell me everything truthfully.

"Have you ever considered changing?" I asked.

"This is my reason for being. More than I love anything else in the world, I love everyone respecting and noticing me. When people trust me with their secrets, I feel joy that surpasses my wildest imaginations." Kushida announced with a genuinely twisted smile.

Knowing the anxiety, suffering, embarrassment, and hopes that people held within their hearts was Kushida's forbidden fruit.

"Boring, isn't it? But to me, it's everything."

Her smile suddenly disappeared.

"I don't think it's boring, Kushida. I'm honestly envious of you..." I said.

"Huh? What do you mean '*envious*'?" Kushida narrowed her eyes.

"You have a reason for being that you wholeheartedly embrace and embody... Me on the other hand..." I stopped.

"What is it? Can't you at least tell me that? I revealed everything to you, you know?" she asked with a glare.

"Do you really think you're in a position to say that?" I reminded.

"Screw you..." Kushida snapped back.

"You're a walking bomb, Kushida. Right now, you're pretty harmless because school just started. But once you start amassing everyone's secrets, you can pretty much do the same thing you've done back then. In other words, you'll be holding the entire class hostage. You must've been thinking of using that to threaten me back, right?"

Kushida's face contorted heavily. I seemed to hit her most vital nerve. This was her last resort-- her final card in the future, but I revealed it all too easily.

"Tch... So what? You're gonna expose me now-- so everyone can keep their secrets from me?" Kushida was displeased that I revealed her plan against me.

"That's honestly the best logical solution to this problem. But of course, you wouldn't want that, right? Not only will you lose your status and earn everyone's contempt, but you will also lose your reason for being. You want to prevent that as much as you possibly can to the point where you'll offer your body to me as a bargaining



chip."

"Heh. If you were an idiot like Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun, or any other guy in Class B excluding Hirata-kun, I would never submit my body. But... you're too dangerous. If someone as cunning as you were the one trying to corner me, I can only dream of finding a way out. I basically have no choice." Kushida laughed in self-deprecation.

After I easily revealed her only tangible escape plan, there's no other feeling left in her other than despair.

Unless she steals the phone while knowing the password, Kushida would still have to listen to their demands. But of course, they would be much easier to manipulate. She can probably pull something off before they can do anything to her.

"Don't worry. I was really just testing you earlier. I'd be lying if I say I wasn't interested, but I'm not the type of person to commit a crime." I said before asking. "I want to know about one more thing, Kushida."

"What? I thought we were done with this?" Kushida was clearly annoyed. Unfortunately, she had no choice but to answer all of my questions.

"You hate Horikita, don't you?" I asked.

"Huh? Of course, I do. That bitch told you everything, and she knows my past, too. I want her expelled more than anything," Kushida answered instantly.

"Hmm, since I know everything, I assume you feel the same with me?"

"The hell? That's obvious. You threatened me to reveal my taboo of a past. You ordered me to spread my legs and take off my clothes. I hate you more than anyone in this school," Kushida replied with a glare full of spite and resentment.

"What will you do then? You have no cards. I can easily break our verbal agreement and reveal everything at once," I said.

"That's... Damn it... Please, just tell me what you fucking want... Let's end this already..." Kushida bit her lip in frustration. She's acting tough, but in the end, the situation is still under my control.

"I'll propose the solution I made for this. But, you'll have to trust me."

"Trust you? Heh..." Kushida derided my words. "Well, I don't really have any other choice but to hear it, do I?"

I nodded.

"I'll keep your secret safe. In exchange, I want the two of us to become allies," I said.

"Hah? Allies? What are you...?" Kushida was visibly confused.

"I told you from the very beginning, right? I want the two of us to



stay friends. I won't tell anyone about your secrets, and I'll show you my sincerity by deleting the voice recording after we sort everything out," I explained.

"You'll delete it?" Kushida was slightly invigorated. "Don't take me for an idiot, Ayanokouji-kun. You must have made a bunch of copies of it already."

Of course, her doubts were acceptable. However, the first spark of hope has appeared before her eyes.

"I knew you'd say that, and I can't simply deny the possibility. To offer you some peace of mind, I'll give you my phone so you can see that there aren't any recordings other than the one I took of you. You can even delete it yourself. I'll also let you check my computer for any possible copies."

"Are you... serious?" Kushida continued looking at me with skeptical eyes. The benefits on her side of the deal were simply too much.

"Yes, I am," I replied while navigating my computer. "I know that what I'm saying sounds too good to be true, but your only choice is to comply."

Kushida nodded and approached me to use the computer. After she checked everything, she finally deleted the voice recording from my phone. When I got my phone back, I showed her my current private point balance to make her believe that I didn't buy any hard drives.

I didn't mention that possibility until she gave it back. After all, if Kushida still had my phone, she might check and see the point transfer between me and Horikita. I already have an alibi even if she did it on her own, but knowing how much her emotions are fluctuating, she wouldn't be cerebral enough to think about it.

After checking everything, her empty eyes gained color again. The relief on her face was very noticeable.

"What... will you do about Horikita? She knows about my past too, right?" Kushida asked anxiously.

"I was actually lying earlier," I said.

"What? Lying?"

"When Horikita and I had a long talk back then, I manipulated her into talking about her junior high days. That's when I coincidentally found out about the gist of your past. That's also how I became suspicious of you since way back. But my point is, Horikita didn't know any details. That's the truth," I explained.

"She didn't know any details...?"

"Yeah, I just fooled you into telling me everything. So if you have a target, Horikita wouldn't be worth your time."

"But still! Even if you're telling the truth now, I can't possibly be



satisfied with letting Horikita be!"

"Horikita doesn't care about you. There's no point in worrying about her."

"Still..." Kushida's concern was justified. In the end, Horikita still knows about the incident by itself and that Kushida was somehow the center of it. There's no guarantee that Horikita won't use her knowledge against Kushida in the future.

I decided not to throw Horikita under the bus. After all, it was more efficient for me if Kushida entirely stops thinking of her as a threat. Kushida only hated Horikita because she knew about her past. She didn't have any deep-rooted grudge against her, so if I can take care of the main problem, Kushida should refrain from targeting Horikita, at least for now.

"Alright, I'll get Horikita's word on this. Don't worry, I won't tell her the details of that incident. And quite frankly, she doesn't really seem interested in it." Kushida should realize the weight of my words. "Should she do anything that endangers your secret, I'll do everything I can to expel her myself."

After thinking about my words for a brief second, Kushida nodded in agreement.

"Fine... Make sure to expel her if she does anything suspicious."

"Yeah, I will."

"What will you do about my plan then? I can continue following your demands right now, but once I get enough secrets at my disposal, I can still destroy the class in the future," Kushida asked with a grave expression.

"Then... shame on me, I guess?" I answered straight.

"What? Don't you have some sort of contingency plan against my potential betrayal?"

"Well, if you try to expel me or Horikita, then the two of us will just fight back. If you cause chaos by revealing everyone's secrets, then I'll have no choice but to work together with Hirata and Karuizawa to bring the class back together, no matter hard it is and no matter how long it takes."

My real plan is to expel any hindrances, but I won't say that out loud...

"I'll also expose your past by then."

"Are you serious? You can easily win without consequences if you expose me right now. Once I decide to betray you in the future, all of us will just self-destruct. Everyone loses, including you," she explained.

"Yeah, you're right. And it'll be my fault for trusting you." I looked straight into Kushida's eyes.

"Trusting me, huh?" Kushida sneered at herself. Even she knew



that trusting her is the worst move one could make.

"Yes... I want to trust you. Do you still not trust me, Kushida?" I asked.

"I..."

*Finally, I will tie the last string.*

I slowly took out something from my pocket. It was a very small cassette recorder.

"Well, if you still don't, your decision might've been right."

"Eh...? On your hand... Is that...? Did you just..." Kushida immediately knew what I meant by taking out the item.

"I recorded everything we talked about tonight, Kushida. Right from the moment we entered the room, to the time when I played the recording on my phone, including the moment where you revealed every single detail of your past to me, and up until this very moment... this recorder was taking in everything. It was my real contingency plan," I narrated.

*When she thought everything was finally okay, when hope filled her heart again... Everything comes crashing down.*

"No..."

"I asked a friend to transfer me the funds so I can buy this recorder. That's why nothing looked odd when you saw my private point balance earlier. It was an expensive buy, after all," I explained.

She could only stare blankly at the recorder that I was holding.

"Haha... So... you really planned to betray me in the end, huh?"

Kushida didn't even glare at me.

She just accepted her defeat. After all, her entire lifeline was recorded on that very tape.

Her past, her fake angelic self, and her hidden dark side-- all of them were laid bare.

She hit rock bottom.

To Kushida, I was holding her whole high school life by the throat, ready to slash it with a knife and eliminate it forever.

Once that happens, she can either live in hell... or drop out.

When I peered into her face, tears started welling up.

However, it didn't take long before she noticed something odd.

"But why would you try to tell me this now? It doesn't make sense..."

I slowly opened the cassette recorder.

"I *did* plan to betray you... But Kushida, I've already made up my mind right from the start."

I took out the tape from the recorder and dropped it on the ground.

*Smash.*



The one and only tape that contained everything was now in pieces after I stomped on it.

"What are you-?" Kushida was perplexed by my actions.

I slowly grabbed the disordered films and tore them apart.

"I laid all of my cards in front of you and burned them all way. My so-called contingency plan and only leverage against you is now in pieces," I said.

"Why...? Why?! I don't understand! You already had me twice!" Kushida furiously looked for answers.

Kushida Kikyou was distrustful by nature and she absolutely abhorred losing, more so than normal people do. That's why after getting bested twice, even she found it hard to accept that I'm just giving her a free escape again.

"I told you... I just wanted you to trust me, Kushida. I don't care how you act in front of me, or how you act in front of people even if I know about *'the dark side'* you're hiding from others. My only goal isn't to antagonize you at all," I said. "I want to be your friend and your ally.

"You're ridiculous!" Kushida's strained voice exclaimed in confusion. "You knew I wouldn't listen to you if you just revealed what you know without having the cards to lock me down. I don't know if you're telling the truth, and I don't think I can do anything to confirm that at this point... But if you are, then didn't you just set all of this up... to make friends with me?!"

"I don't know... I didn't have many friends back then-- No, who am I kidding? I didn't have *any* friends back then. That's probably why I began to think like this." I said before looking at her straight in the eyes.

"And that's probably why I don't want to lose the first friend I made."

The tears that Kushida tried to hold back finally streamed down her rosy cheeks.

"Damn it... Why should I be moved by those corny words? You're just a smart and athletic loner." Kushida started hurling insults at me while wiping her tears. "You're just a pervert... who tried to rape me. You're just a cunning bastard who manipulates others... You're just... You're just..."

I stayed silent as Kushida says what's on her mind. I didn't interrupt her as she let out the things she wanted to say.

She continued crying for a minute or two. After she was done, Kushida glared at me with an annoyed expression.

"Do you trust me, Kushida?" I asked.



"I do, idiot. Are you happy?" she replied scornfully.

"Thank you," I replied while staring at her.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"There's nothing else to look at other than your swollen eyes and snot-filled face," I joked.

Kushida furiously threw a pillow at me.

"Whatever... I'll leave now. It's getting late," Kushida said coldly.

She got up from my bed and picked up her bag. I grabbed her wrist before she could reach the door.

"Kushida," I called.

"What now?" she asked, still trying to clean up her face.

"When you want to vent your feelings out, come here. I'll listen to you."

*Thud.*

Kushida punched me in the chest with all her might.

"If it wasn't for your monotone way of speaking, I would've immediately thought you were hitting on me," she said.

"I wasn't planning on doing so," I replied.

"Next time, don't you dare record me, or I'll really kill you," she threatened.

I simply nodded.

"Bye-bye, Ayanokouji-kun." Kushida looked away as she exited the door.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*The full title is actually "The Strings Have Been Tied to the Puppet".*

*In the light novel, Kikyou not only hated Suzune for knowing her past. She also hated her stuck-up, high-and-mighty attitude in the early volumes which made Suzune's efforts to reconcile in Volume 6 all but useless. However here, because Suzune followed Kiyotaka's advice to stop being hostile to Kikyou early on, she didn't really develop any other form of hate. As a result, Kikyou became satisfied when Kiyotaka presented her his ultimatum against Suzune. After all, Kikyou didn't really have any personal grudge against her.*

*Compared to the Kikyou in Volume 6, who knows enough secrets to destroy some students in their class, this early Kikyou is much less of a threat to Kiyotaka without the whole "fingerprint on the boob" evidence.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 15.2.2 - Pulling the Strings

As soon as Kushida disappeared, I took out my phone and called someone. When it rang, the other end immediately picked up.

*"Ayanokouji-kun?"*

"Horikita, everything's alright now."

*"What? Did you confront Kushida-san already?"* she asked in confusion.

"Yeah."

*"And she agreed just like that?"*

"Well... I have my methods."

*"Come to my room. I want you to explain everything to me. I can come to your room too if that's what you prefer,"* she demanded.

"No, not right now. I'll tell you myself when I think it's the optimal time. I'll give you the points back by then as well."

"That's... Alright, I understand."

And then I hung up. I began to search up a number that I got a couple of weeks prior. When it rang, the other end also picked up immediately.

*"Ayanokouji?"* An older female voice can be heard.

"Ah, Chabashira-sensei. There's something that I need you to look up," I said.

After I convinced Chabashira-sensei to do what I asked for, I slowly sat down on my bed. I reached out under it and took out an item. The same item can be found under my office chair.

"Hmm... Seems like the bugs also got everything. Good. I doubt Kushida would target me or the class in the future, but there's a high chance she'll still try to get Horikita expelled. When push comes to shove, I guess I can just use these against her," I muttered.

The real reason why I bought an expensive cassette recorder that cost 20,000 points was to cloak the purchase of these two bugs. They both cost 2,500 points each. The difference between a 25,000 point total and a 20,000 point total wasn't that big, so as long as she didn't know each and every purchase I made from day one, there's no way Kushida can deduce the truth. Buying three bugs would also be an option because 7,500 points aren't that big either, but if I presented one to Kushida, she'll think that there might be more of them.

I don't really have to worry about getting found out eventually.



Because as time goes on, this purchase will become virtually impossible to deduce.

*Author's Notes:*

*Kiyotaka used the Sony M-909 Microcassette-Corder.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 16.1 - Peculiar Morning

May 26th, Wednesday.

It's been two weeks since my confrontation with Kushida. I was currently holding the memorandum which was prepared for that night, rereading the details of each condition I put in. I would've taken this out if she still decided to doubt me in the end.

"I'm surprised Kushida didn't ask for something like this. Her mind must've been too occupied with worry and anxiety at that time..."

Kushida has been coming to my room every other day or every two days to vent her feelings. I just sit there and quietly listen to her. Of course, whenever she asks for my opinion, I just give a neutral answer.

Kushida and I have been acting the same as usual, and yet, I can't help but feel like we've become a bit closer since that night.

I sighed in reminiscence, folding the contract and putting it inside the drawer. I checked the group chats to see how everyone's doing.

"Hmm... The exam will be on Friday, the day after tomorrow. Based on Hirata's report, everyone's pretty much ready to take on the exam," I muttered. "I'm glad we made it in time."

But regarding Ken, it would be great if his score can hit the 60's. Well, because his foundation was so bad, I guess this much was expected.

I've been thinking about it for a few days now. Why would they suddenly change the topics for our exam when there are only two weeks left? The only reason I can come up with was to prevent some sort of foul play like cheating... which begs the question. How can we even cheat on the exam?

On the surface, it seemed like they wanted to discourage cheating... but something felt odd.

That mock test is surely a clue.

Until now, everyone still found that test bizarre for a few reasons. Chabashira-sensei implied that the test was used as a reference for our class points in May. However, that reason in itself was already kind of out of place. They could just give us a surprise quiz covering all of the lessons for the first three weeks. Instead, the questions were mostly on the junior high level, combined with those difficult higher-level questions at the end of the test.



"Hmm... What if those questions were the clues themselves?" I murmured before sitting up from my bed.

I'll look into this tomorrow. If my hunch is right, we can achieve the highest class average in the entire year. I'd want someone to accompany me, but who do I choose? Hirata and Kushida would stand out, so I guess it'll be Horikita.

I decided to sleep after sending Horikita a text.

On the next day, I prepared to head out after finishing my morning exercise routines.

When the elevator opened...

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun!" Ichinose Honami was inside.

"Good morning, Ichinose," I greeted. "You're early."

"Ahaha, you're usually a bit earlier than me though. I see you walking ahead of me almost every morning," she said.

That's true. But of course, there are one or two days in a week where I don't come to school as early.

"The midterm exams are right around the corner, huh?" she said.

"Yeah, how's your class doing?"

"We're doing great! Everyone's really diligent with their studies. Class C has worked pretty hard these past few weeks," Ichinose replied with a smile.

"Class B's the same. There are more students in our class who're lower when it comes to their innate academic abilities, but through Hirata and Kushida's leadership, everyone came together and studied rigorously," I narrated.

"So Hirata-kun and Kushida-san are the ones leading the class, huh?" Ichinose mused with a curious expression.

"Yeah, they're amazing."

"How about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Do you struggle in academics?"

"Not really. I'm not as clever as Hirata, Kushida, or as studious as our top students like Horikita and Yukimura, but I can score highly on tests," I replied. "You can call me book-smart or intelligent, I guess."

"Oh? So you're not only athletic, but you're also bright?" She praised me, putting her hands together with a clap.

"Nah, you give me too much credit. You were assigned in Class B after our admission, right? Surely, you're smarter than I am."

"I wonder about that~," she said, looking at me with a meaningful smile.

The two of us chatted on our way to the main building. The moment we drew near, Ichinose was instantly surrounded by other students. Apparently, they're her classmates.

"Honami-chan!"



"Honami-chan, good morning!"

"Good morning, everyone!" Ichinose gave them a warm greeting in return.

After buying a copy of a list containing the names and faces of every student in our year, I managed to memorize every single one of them. Chabashira-sensei said that as long as what I'm trying to purchase contains nothing but names and faces, she'd allow me to buy it. I could probably coax her into giving me something with more information, but given her personality, it'll come at a very hefty price. So, I just bought a simple list for 15,000 points.

Right now, the three girls talking to Ichinose are Amikura Mako, Minamikata Kozue, and Andou Sayo.

"Oh, if it isn't Ayanokouji-kun!" Andou said, noticing me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, this is Amikura Mako-chan, this is Andou Sayo-chan, and this is Minamikata Kozue-chan." Ichinose introduced them to me.

"Good morning," I greeted.

"Heyo~!"

The three of them greeted me back with lively attitudes.

This is weird, though. Andou called my name out, and based on the other two's reactions, they also seemed to know who I am. How? Did Ichinose tell them about the swimming class?

"Honami-chan, are you and Ayanokouji-kun close?" Minamikata asked with a smirk.

"Well, we've talked a bunch of times. The two of us met up in the elevator by coincidence earlier, so we just decided to walk to school together," Ichinose smoothly narrated.

"I see. I thought something else was going on. Yume-chan and Hitomi-chan would panic, you know?" said Amikura.

"Eh...?" Ichinose smiled bitterly.

This is getting awkward. I should probably get out of here.

"Then, I guess I'll tread ahead."

"Hmm~? Are you not curious, Ayanokouji-kun? I'm sure you already get it, but some girls in our class have a huge crush on you." Amikura addressed me before I could escape.

"Why would they?" I asked, glancing back at Ichinose.

"Eh? I didn't tell them anything, Ayanokouji-kun. I swear!" She waved her hands in a panic.

"Ohh? What might you be talking about, Honami-chan?" Minamikata asked, inching closer to Ichinose.

"That's..." Ichinose looked back at me.

Sigh... At the very least, Ichinose didn't blabber about the swimming class. She really is an honest girl.

"It's fine, Ichinose. It's not something that would damage my



dignity or whatever," I shrugged.

When I gave her the go signal, Ichinose turned to her confused classmates with a grin.

"Do you remember way back in April, when we had that swimming class?" She started with a question.

"Oh, the one where Shibata-kun and Kanzaki-kun went head-to-head?" Andou asked.

Shibata Sou and... Kanzaki Ryuuji, huh?

"Yeah! But didn't the teacher tell us something even more shocking? There was a student in Class B who almost beat the world record!" Ichinose narrated with a smile.

At that time, we were still Class D.

"Oh, I remember!" Minamikata replied, with Andou and Amikura nodding beside her.

"Well, that was actually Ayanokouji-kun," she chortled.

"Ehh?! Really?! Ayanokouji-kun is more athletic than Shibata-kun?! That's amazing!" said Andou.

"He's not just good-looking, huh?" Minamikata smirked at me while rubbing her chin. She was also nodding her head repeatedly, much like how a grandparent checks his or her grandchild's growth.

"Nah, Shibata-kun's in the soccer club, right? I may swim faster, but that doesn't mean I'm more athletic than him," I replied, denying their praises.

"Look, Ayanokouji-kun's terribly humble, too," Ichinose chuckled, whispering those words aloud.

"Isn't this bad for Yume-chan and Hitomi-chan, though? Once the girls from other classes know about this they'd have even more rivals!"

"Then don't spread it..." I said.

"Heh~? Well, if you forbid us from doing it, then we won't," she said.

"Then, I forbid you from telling anyone about my identity as Class B's mermaid or something," I joked.

"If you say so~!"

Thankfully, they easily agreed while laughing at my joke. I don't know if I'm getting better at jokes, but I sure hope so.

"I would've liked to go now, but my question remains unanswered. If Ichinose-san didn't tell you anything, how did you guys even know who I am?" I asked.

"Hahaha! Are you that scared of having people know about you, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Andou.

This is bad. I might've pushed the question too hard.

"Not really. I'm just curious," I explained. "If it's someone like Hirata or Kushida, then I'd understand. But if the name of a nobody



like me gets passed around, I immediately assume that it's brought on by some distasteful rumors..."

"Oh, I see! That would certainly make me uneasy," commented Amikura.

"But there's one thing you're wrong about, Ayanokouji-kun. You're *not* a nobody at all! Most of the girls in our year had their eyes on you for a long time now." Minamikata pointed at me.

"You're kidding, right?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Ahaha! Of course not~! Look!" Minamikata brought the screen of her phone in front of my face.

"Ranking charts?"

"That's right! You're a trend here, placing fourth in the hot guy rankings!" Minamikata announced as she zoomed in on my name.

What the hell is this...? For a second, I saw things like '*rich guy rankings*', '*creeper rankings*', and '*boys who should die*'...

I glanced at Ichinose and saw her smiling wryly, watching everything unfold. Her expression looked a bit apologetic.

"As you can see, Satonaka-kun from Class A holds the first place, and Hirata-kun, your classmate, is in second place, with Hashimoto-kun, also from Class A, sitting in third place," she elaborated.

The fifth placer is also from Class A.

But dear lord... If I knew this thing existed, I should've just asked Kushida about it. My precious 15,000 points...

"I see. At the very least, I'm not known for some weird rumors," I said, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Hmm~? Be honest, Ayanokouji-kun. You're happy about what you've seen, right? After all, now you know that you're quite popular with the girls." Minamikata teased me with a smug smile.

"I think any guy in the top ten or top twenty would be happy," I said.

"Fufun~, don't dodge the question now." Minamikata poked me with her elbow.

"Fine. I'm so happy that I feel like bragging about this to all of my guy-friends as soon as I enter the classroom," I said in the most monotone voice I could ever pull off in my entire life."

"Hahaha! What the heck?"

"You sounded far from being happy!"

They laughed, including Ichinose.

Since the five of us walked together as we chatted, it was inevitable that we'd grab some attention. I saw a bunch of students staring curiously at our strange little group. Surely, Ichinose was a well-known figure in our year, and since Amikura, Andou, and Minamikata are her classmates, they should share that popularity to some degree.



On the other hand, while I'm popular with the girls. A lot of the guys would start wondering what the hell I'm doing, walking with four cute girls, including Ichinose Honami, and chatting with them like a close friend. After all, I'm still pretty much a nobody hailing from a different class.

"Well, this has been fun, but I'll go ahead now. Goodbye." I waved after we reached a certain hallway.

"See you later, Ayanokouji-kun~! Give us your contact info next time!"

She must've gotten really comfortable with me in the short time that we chatted.

Ichinose and the other two also said their goodbyes.

What a peculiar morning. It was fun, but peculiar nonetheless.

*Author's Notes:*

*The Hot Guy Rankings:*

*This time, Kiyotaka placed 4th, instead of 5th. He's not on top of the gloomy rankings either, mostly because he's always been seen having lunch with Yousuke's group with Kei or Kikyou's group, engaging in conversations with them instead of staying silent.*

*Of course, his appearance is still gloomy so he might be somewhere down there.*

*And let's be honest here, even if it wasn't mentioned in the light novel, we all knew that Masayoshi was in 3rd place.*

*Minamikata Kozue:*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 16.2 - Looking Back

I arrived at the classroom and found that there were still very few people.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun," Hirata greeted.

"Good morning, Hirata," I replied.

Azuma, Ishikura, and Mii-chan also greeted me.

When I sat down on my chair, the calm and collected Horikita closed her book and faced me.

"So, what's with your message last night?" she asked.

"Hmm, the reason why I wanted you to accompany me was so I didn't have to explain too much. But it wouldn't be fair for you if I don't say anything."

"It's alright if you just give me the gist of what you're planning," she sighed.

"Frankly speaking, I think I found a trick for everyone to get a perfect score in the exam."

Hearing my words, Horikita's eyes instantly narrowed.

"What? You can't possibly be talking about cheating, right?" Horikita asked with a perplexed expression.

"No, I don't think so. You'll see later."

"Just what in the world are you going to..." Horikita stared at me before pondering what I said.

When lunchtime arrived, Horikita and I went to the cafeteria without attracting too much attention.

Seeing me eyeing the people in line, Horikita probably wanted to ask some questions, but since I made it clear to her that explanations will come later, she just kept observing me.

When I saw the perfect target, I immediately followed them to their table. I sat beside him without warning and Horikita sat across the two of us.

"Good afternoon, Senpai. Do you mind if we ask you something?" I said.

"What the-? Who the hell are you guys?" He slightly flinched in surprise.

"I'm Ayanokouji from Class 1-B. Senpai, are you a second-year, or a third-year?" I asked.

He regained his composure shortly after hearing my introduction.



Not only that, but he also seemed to be expecting us to be first-years.

"Third-year," he answered. "What do you want?"

"You're from Class D, aren't you, Senpai?"

"Yeah, so what?" He glared at me.

Horikita seemed surprised about me correctly guessing his class, but after a few seconds, she finally figured it out.

"Don't worry, Senpai. We're only here to offer you a sweet deal," I said.

"A sweet deal?" He raised an eyebrow.

Since everyone was minding their own businesses in the crowded cafeteria, my voice was drowned out by the noisy conversations of the students.

"The test questions for the midterm exams during the first semester of your first year-- do you still have them? Or if you don't, do you at least know anyone who does?"

At this point, even Horikita stared at me in shock.

"Do you even understand what you're asking from me?" he replied with a question.

"Of course, I do. I don't think this kind of method would be considered cheating. We just want to use those old test questions for '*study purposes*'."

"Why are you asking me?"

"Nothing special. I just thought you'd be easier to negotiate with since you look like you're struggling with your points. I can give you some points in exchange for those test questions." I said looking at his free vegetable lunch set.

"I don't have them, but I know someone who does. I can get the test questions from him and give them to you directly, but how much are you willing to give me?" he narrowed his eyes.

"10,000 points."

"Are you kidding me? I won't accept anything below 30,000," he said.

"Let me tell you something, Senpai. I thought of this strategy as a way to increase our class average, not to prevent anyone from getting expelled. We'll be totally fine even I call this whole thing off," I said with a grave expression. "And you're not the only one we can negotiate with, so please don't get too ambitious with your demands."

Our positions switched in an instant. There's no way he can let this deal go knowing that others can take it.

"Tch, shit... Fine, 20,000..." He clicked his tongue in frustration.

"You didn't seem to understand what I said, Senpai. Fine, I'll settle for 12,000."



"Damn it... That's too low..." he was agonizing about accepting my deal.

I guess I can let him bite the carrot now.

"Hmm... How about this then? Do you remember the mock test that all of us were asked to take before May? I'll give you 18,000 points if you can include that."

His expression instantly changed after hearing my compromise.

"Alright-! I'll settle, I'll settle. I'll give everything to you directly in exchange for 18,000 points."

"It's a deal then. Don't rip me off, Senpai. Point transfers are always recorded."

"I know, I know. It's not like I wanna get in trouble, too," he said, acting irritated despite his obvious elation with how everything went.

I transferred 18,000 private points to his account and gave him my contact info.

After everything was settled, Horikita and I got up from our seats and proceeded to line up. That bit got me hungry. I wonder what I should buy.

"Ayanokouji-kun," Horikita called out to me as soon as the two of us sat in our respective seats. Her lunch set looks pretty appetizing.

Horikita usually makes her own bento. But since it's pretty rare for her to visit the cafeteria during lunch, I guess she decided to make an exception for today. I'm glad I specified to her that our business will be *"during lunch at the cafeteria"*.

"Hm?"

"We're in a pretty inconspicuous part of the cafeteria. I believe there's no risk in explaining everything here?"

"Of course. Where do you want me to start?" I asked, stuffing a spoonful in my mouth.

"You can tell me everything at your own pace. Please don't leave out any details," she replied.

"Alright, I'll ask you a question then. What did you think of it-- of what I did just now?"

"It was... pretty ridiculous. No ordinary student would think of getting old test questions from upperclassmen unless they're good friends with them," she said.

"Well, you're right. Some might even think that it's tantamount to cheating."

"That's what I'm concerned about."

"You don't have to worry. If the school really considered it cheating, they would've outlined it in the rules," I shrugged. "And besides, I knew everything was permissible during our first exchange. His composure indicated that bartering points like that is



a common practice in this school."

"But... tomorrow's the last day before the exam. Even if the test questions turn out to be of use, they wouldn't be able to help us much, wouldn't they?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's why you can call this both an insurance and a gamble."

"I get the insurance part, but why a gamble?"

"I'm sure you're wondering why I went ahead and asked for the surprise mock test's questions, too."

"Yes, I was. Knowing you, it must be part of the strategy you came up with, right?"

I nodded.

"Didn't you find that test weird? If they were really going to use that test as reference for our performance in the first three weeks, why would they use junior-high level questions mixed with three high-level questions by the end?"

"You're right, I was wondering about that too."

"It's about remembering the questions, Horikita."

"Remembering the questions?" Horikita pondered for a second before looking at me with a nonplussed expression.

"You figured it out?"

"A student won't be able to remember the questions from a test that they found easy and familiar... but extremely hard questions will surely remain in their minds," narrated Horikita.

"They even went so far as to put all three of them at the end," I added. "Once I get those questions from the upperclassmen--"

"You'll be able to compare them by checking the last three questions," she finished. "So you weren't aiming for the test questions to be simply similar. You wanted them to be completely the same. That's why you called it a trick to give everyone perfect scores."

"Excellent, as expected of you," I praised.

"Thank you, but Ayanokouji-kun, even if the questions from the mock test turn out to be completely identical, there's no guarantee that the midterms will be the same thing."

"Hence, a gamble," I said.

Horikita shook her head with a sigh

"When did you plan this?" she asked.

"I thought everything through last night, but I had my hunch ever since Chabashira-sensei announced the change in topics. It was a move that would yield the opposite conclusion from mine. If the coverage was '*suddenly changed*', then the thought of using older test questions would've been useless because the content of the exam would also '*change*,'" I explained.



"Then how did you arrive at this conclusion?"

"I was thinking about how Ken, Ike, and Yamauchi even got admitted to this school. If their academic abilities were so poor, then they wouldn't be able to maintain their places here. After all, this school expels students who fail the exams without any exceptions."

"But just from that..."

"It's a good argument, but of course, it wouldn't be too convincing. What made me sure about this was Chabashira-sensei's indifferent attitude towards the three of them in particular. Both of us know how obsessed she is with Class A, right? If that was the case, she would be instructing us to keep an eye on those three," I explained.

"So you're saying that her indifference was a clue in and of itself? Chabashira-sensei was telling us that their poor academics doesn't matter because *'there is a way to make them pass'*-- is that what you've concluded?"

"Yeah, that's right," I nodded.

"I see... I understand. We won't know if your theory is right until we get the results, but I don't think you'll go through with this idea unless you're at least eighty or ninety percent sure, right? And besides, this is a low-risk, high-return plan." Horikita nodded before turning to me. "As usual, your ridiculous way of thinking amazes me, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Thanks," I replied, taking her words as a compliment. It would've been great if she smiled while saying that. Her cool expression only puts pressure on me.

"But at the same time, it daunts me too," she said.

"Why?" I asked, looking at her straight in the eyes.

"The way you harassed that upperclassman mentally was unnerving, to say the least," Horikita responded with a reluctant expression.

"The right situation calls for the right attitude. If I acted any weaker, he'll be harder to negotiate with," I answered. "Don't worry. My boring personality is my real personality."

"I see," she sighed. "I'll trust your words as an ally."

"Thank you."

After that, we headed back to the classroom, waiting for our end of the bargain. While I was hanging out with Akito and Ken, I suddenly received a message.

"Oh, wait a sec'. I'll talk to Horikita for a bit. The thing we worked on earlier finally showed some results," I explained vaguely.

"Aight'," Ken said with a grin.



"Sure. Do what you need to do, mister tutor." Akito was the same.

When Horikita saw me approach her seat, she looked at me with widened eyes, probably due to her feelings of anticipation.

"How was it? Were they the same?" she asked.

"Calm down, Horikita. I haven't checked it yet. We'll look at it at the same time," I said.

Horikita nodded in response.

I tapped the notification and images started appearing. They were questions for the midterm exams. Horikita and I didn't bother looking at them in detail. What we're looking for were the questions from the mock test.

"Here they are," I said zooming in on the last three questions.

"They're... exactly the same... down to the last letter." Horikita's lips trembled slightly.

"If the midterm exams follow the same rules, then we might just get the highest class average in the entire year," I said.

"You're right. Send them to me, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll distribute these questions to everyone after the last study session tomorrow."

"Yeah, that's what I was intending to do. We can't carelessly show these to them or their motivations to study will plummet," I nodded.

"Yes, and if we tell them that the test questions have a very high chance to be completely identical, they'd frantically memorize each and every answer with the hopes of breezing through the exam," she elaborated.

After saying those words, Horikita turned to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun... If you win this gamble, then your plan might just work," Horikita said with a smile.

This is the first time I've ever seen this girl smile genuinely.

Someday, I hope I can learn how to smile like that.

*Author's Notes:*

*Kiyotaka's Private Points: 120,459 pr*

*Suzune's Private Points: 133,731 pr*

*Pending -25,000 for Kiyotaka and +25,000 for Suzune because of that loan.*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 16.3 - Class B's Preparation

I was mesmerized by Horikita's beautiful smiling face. When she felt that I was staring at her for an extended period of time, only then did Horikita realize that she was actually smiling.

"E-Eherm," she cleared her throat, returning to her cool and collected state. "Anyway, this is good news, Ayanokouji-kun."

It seems like Horikita wants to avoid talking about what happened just now. If that's the case, then it would be disrespectful of me to tease her about it, as much as I want to.

"Yeah, do you want to tell Hirata and the other tutors?" I asked.

"No need. The fewer people involved, the lesser chance for these to be leaked accidentally." Horikita answered with a serious expression.

"Do you not trust them?"

"That's a tricky question. It's not that I don't, but I won't ask for their help when I don't need to," she explained. "I have no problems cooperating with my classmates, even with someone like Kushida-san. Your words and abilities gave me a wake-up call, after all... But I think it's not a good idea to rely on someone else all the time."

Considering her *"I don't like people"* attitude during the first week, this mindset of hers isn't the worst development. But it would've been better if she could put more trust into someone like Hirata.

"That's true. Forcing cooperation between people isn't always the best option-- I agree with you on that. You're someone who doesn't sugarcoat anything, so being friends with a thick-skinned guy like me is the only way to go," I joked.

"Thick-skinned? I see. I thought you were just a masochist back then." Her face told me that she wasn't joking at all.

"You didn't have to do me like that, Horikita." I tried to keep the conversation going, but Horikita has already turned away from me.

"In any case, I want you to send those test questions to me later. I'll let you handle the explanation part tomorrow." Horikita opened her book once more. "You can go chat with your other friends now, Ayanokouji-kun."

Horikita didn't have to be so adamant in shooing me away. But given that I saw her smile, I guess everything was worth it.



Time passed by and I'm now in my room. After sending the images to Horikita, I proceeded to chat with my friends until it was time to sleep.

When the next day came, Horikita and I finally decided to tell Hirata and Kushida about the plan. They promised to help us gather the class later. And when Chabashira-sensei left us after the last homeroom period, Hirata stood up and got everyone's attention.

"Everyone, I know we all agreed for this last day to be a self-study day, but there's something Ayanokouji-kun would like to say before you leave," he announced.

Hirata instantly attracted everyone's eyes and ears. Meanwhile, Kushida and Horikita divided the number of papers among the two of them so they can be distributed. I walked up and stood behind the lectern, facing the students of Class B.

"Everyone, what you're holding right now are old test questions given to me by a senpai," I declared.

"Huh? Old test questions?"

"Will we use these for studying?"

"Are the topics even the same?"

Everyone voiced their questions and opinions on the matter, but after giving the papers a quick scan, they noticed that the questions were very similar to the study materials that they've been using.

To be honest, even I was amazed. According to Hirata and the other tutors, Horikita had the biggest contribution in terms of picking the topics that will most likely be on the test. Seeing the similarities between her sample questions and the old test questions, I can only praise Horikita in my mind for her amazing feat.

"Those test questions and the ones that will appear in the exam for tomorrow are most likely going to be identical or at least close to being identical," I said. "I advise everyone to memorize the answers for each subject."

The class erupted the moment they heard those words.

"Ayanokouji, are you serious?!" Ike cried.

"D-Doesn't that mean we can get a perfect score if we just memorized all of these?" Karuizawa said.

"The heck?! We wouldn't have needed to study our butts off if we had these from the start! Ahaha!" Yamauchi complained even as he laughed.

Everyone was celebrating. At this point, Kushida tried to give a copy of the questions to Kouenji, who decided to stay inside the classroom for some reason.

"Kouenji-kun, please take one if you like. I'm sure it'll help." She



handed one set to him with a smile.

"Hmph, thank you for your concern, girl. But I will gently decline. I have no need for such things. I merely stayed to hear whatever beautiful things Ayanokouji-boy had to say." He stood up and grabbed his bag. "Since he did not disappoint me, I am now satisfied. Goodbye."

Kouenji exited the room with his usual elegant strides. Seeing him like this was a normal occurrence for Class B.

Hirata raised his hand to shift the attention back to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can you explain how you knew about this?" He finally addressed the elephant in the room.

I elaborated my theory similar to how I did to Horikita. Of course, I nitpicked some details that can be omitted, like specifying Ken and the others' poor academic abilities. As expected, everyone was incredibly shocked by my explanation.

"Y-You're insane, Ayanokouji!"

"How the hell do you even think of that?!"

"As expected of Class B's leader!"

"Ayanokouji-kun is such a genius!"

The boys praised me with vigor while the girls cheered in excitement.

"I only suggested this because I believe that everyone is ready for the exam by now. At the end of the day, what I said were all theories- speculations at best," I explained. "If you can afford to give this day up, please use all of your remaining time to memorize the answers for these questions."

"I'm sure everyone's more than ready for the exams now, Ayanokouji-kun! We'll try our best to memorize these answers and get a high score!" said Kushida.

"You got it, Kiyotaka. I won't let your hard work get wasted." The usually silent Akito spoke up for me as Haruka and Ken cheered behind him.

"Let's do this, everyone! Class B will aim for an all-perfect scorer!" yelled Ike.

"Yeah!"

What Ike said was impossible, but everyone cheered with him regardless. Our class has become quite lively, hasn't it?

Class B dispersed after getting their sets of test questions. When I got back to my room, everyone in the class group chat continued talking about me, showering me with praises and compliments.

"I wonder if this is what Kushida was referring to when she talked about being noticed by everyone," I muttered.

Someone like her would be over the moon about this, but I can't say I'm the same. Of course, I feel very happy that my classmates



appreciate me, but not to the point where I would constantly look for their compliments and approval.

If I'm being completely honest, there's a point where I'd rather not get praised. As someone who innately dislikes attention, I'd need some time to get used to this.

When I got back to my room, everyone was talking about the answers we gave them.

*(15:40) [This totally feels like a cheat sheet!]*

*(15:40) [But thanks to Ayanokouji, I don't feel guilty at all!]*

*(15:40) [I know, right?! Like, Ayanokouji-kun is so smart for thinking this!]*

*(15:40) [Heh, I'm gonna get perfect scores, for sure!]*

*(15:41) [You're not even studying yet!]*

They should probably get on with the memorizing as soon as they can.

*(15:41) [Ike, Yamauchi, stop chatting and get on with your study materials. Lol.]*

I chatted before closing my phone.

With all those said and done, I'm expecting my classmates to achieve very high results.

*Author's Notes:*



## Vol. 1: Chapter 17.1 - Midterm Exams

May 28th, Friday.

"Good morning, Class B," Chabashira-sensei smirked seeing everyone's stiff appearances. "No absences, huh? Well, I guess that's only natural. Are you all ready?"

"Everyone has worked their hardest for the past few weeks, Chabashira-sensei. I don't think anyone in our class will fail," Hirata answered, carrying the thoughts and feelings of everyone.

"That's good, that's good." Her smile was unchanging as she nodded on Hirata's reply. "This midterm exam will be the foundation of your academics. After taking this, you'll have your finals in July. Do your best because the school will be rewarding you with a nice vacation during summer break if everyone passes."

"A vacation?"

"That's right, a dream vacation on an island surrounded by the brilliant blue sea," she answered.

It was a no-brainer that the boys immediately thought of girls in swimsuits.

"W-What is this pressure...?" muttered Ijuuin.

Even Chabashira-sensei stepped back from the obvious tension that the students exuded... which mostly came from the boys.

"Everyone, let's do our absolute best!" howled Ike.

"Yeah!"

Driven by Ike's misguided enthusiasm, the entire class's morale increased two or threefold. I was debating on whether I should cheer with them or not, but feeling Horikita's terrifying glare, I chose to stay silent.

Social Studies, Japanese, Chemistry, Mathematics, and English--those were the order of the subjects we will take.

After the questions for the first subject were distributed, I instantly scanned the paper to see if they were the same as the old ones.

I won the gamble.

Even if I didn't memorize everything to the tee, it was evident the old test questions were identical to what we were taking right now. The order and phrasing were slightly different, but the questions themselves were essentially the same. I glanced to the side and saw Horikita looking at me with a triumphant glare. *"It's Class B's*



victory", I thought as the two of us nodded at each other.

I glanced around the classroom to see how my classmates were faring.

Almost everyone was smiling. They really did study the questions we gave them. Alright, time to answer the exam myself.

Time passed by and at last, we finished our Mathematics exam. Students can finally take a break.

"Hell yeah! This is a complete win for Class B!" Ike cheered with the boys.

"I could probably score 120 points at this rate!" As usual, Yamauchi's confident words reverberated around the group.

Meanwhile, the Ayanokouji Group was having a meeting around Airi's seat.

"How'd everyone do?" I asked.

"No problem~! Those test questions were a godsend, Kiyopon! We got this in the bag!" Haruka raised her hand for a high-five.

Of course, I responded in kind.

"I probably scored 90 or more points on every subject. Not only were those a big help, but Kiyotaka's study materials also made it a whole lot easier for us, even if we didn't get to memorize everything."

"That's true... If Kiyotaka-kun didn't teach us the way he did, I'd probably score a bit lower even if I had the test questions," said Airi.

Our eyes turned to Ken, who was frantically scanning the test questions for English.

"Ken, is everything alright? You were especially weak in English. Did you study the materials properly?" I asked.

"Ken's fine. He's just making sure that he didn't memorize everything incorrectly." Akito answered for him while shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, yeah." Ken turned to us. "I was almost in trouble last night. Good thing Akito came over."

"Yeah, I thought I'd go to his room to do some last-minute studying together, but this idiot fell asleep while studying English. If I didn't call his phone over and over for more than ten times, I would've been stuck outside waiting for no one."

"Pfft, what are you, Kencchin's girlfriend?" Haruka scoffed.

"Shut up," Akito rolled his eyes at her.

"I won't expect you to score too high, Ken. But you have to be careful. The class average will probably be a lot higher this time around, so the passing grade might be hard to reach if you mess up."



"Yeah, don't worry about it, Kiyotaka. Even if I can't understand most of these questions, I took the time to memorize most of them last night," nodded Ken.

When the bell rang, everyone finally took the last two exams. As expected, everything was still the same.

"Good job, everyone. You all seem confident in yourselves. I'm looking forward to the results." With that, Chabashira-sensei left the classroom carrying our test papers.

"Let's go! We're finally done!"

"Hey, hey, let's go shopping afterward~!"

"I'll reward myself by buying the latest game!"

Class B happily celebrated the end of our midterm exams. A lot of them invited their tutors out as a sign of thanks. Of course, Ike and Yamauchi happily went with the flow in order to ask Kushida on a date.

"Ah, I'm sorry Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun. I have plans later. But, don't worry, your thanks are more than enough for me! It's been a pleasure tutoring you guys!" Kushida declined them with a huge smile.

"Kushida-chan, you're such an angel!" yelled Yamauchi.

"You're too kind for this world!" followed Ike.

I glanced at Horikita, wondering what she was doing and what I saw really surprised me.

"Horikita-san, do you wanna come with us?" asked Satou.

"We'll have lunch in Keyaki Mall and do some shopping afterwards. Don't worry about using your points, we'll treat you on everything!" Mori declared with a smile.

"That's... I can't possibly..." Horikita's head was probably a mess right now.

"It's alright, really! Let us at least thank you for tutoring us." Satou insisted.

Horikita reflexively looked at me. At this point, all I can do is nod. In the end, it was still her decision.

"Then... I'll take you up on your offer. But, I'll only accept your treat during lunch," she replied.

"Ehh? You're not gonna go shopping with us? You're such a cute girl, Horikita-san. It would've been fun if we could buy clothes together while talking about our tastes in fashion!" said Mori.

"I'm really sorry, but I have to decline. I have something else to do later," Horikita answered sternly.

"Well, if that's the case, we'll just treat you big-time for lunch!" Satou reached a verdict cementing their plan.

It would've been great if she could become friends with the other



girls.

I stood up and approached Akito, who was seating in front of me.

"Wanna go ahead and grab lunch with the others?" I asked.

"Sure, I was just about to stand up as well," he answered.

The two of us invited Ken, Haruka, and Airi to Pallete. The Ayanokouji Group merrily celebrated the conclusion of our midterm exams. All we have to do now is buckle up and wait for the results.

Author's Notes:



## Vol. 1: Chapter 17.2 - Foothold

The day of the results finally arrived.

"Quiet down, students. Homeroom's about to start," Chabashira-sensei said as she strode inside the classroom.

At that moment, Ike raised a question.

"Sae-chan-sensei, we were told that the results would be out today, but when exactly?"

"Hmm, you're right. I was supposed to show you the results in the afternoon homeroom, but getting to it now rather than later isn't really a bad idea." Chabashira-sensei suggested.

It seems like she's already used to the nickname that Ike and his gang gave her.

Chabashira-sensei took out a poster and pasted it on the blackboard. She totally expected Ike's question, didn't she?

When she faced us again, Chabashira-sensei was smiling warmly. Anyone can tell that she was genuinely happy with the results.

"You've produced stellar results in your first-semester midterm exams. I have acknowledged your efforts wholeheartedly, Class B," she said.

"Ohh!"

"So high!"

"Look at those 100's!"

There were ten rows of students who scored 100 points in all five subjects. They included me, Horikita, Mii-chan, Kushida, Hirata, Yukimura, Matsushita, Professor, Nishimura, and Kouenji.

Impressive, he really didn't need those test questions. I guess his mock test results weren't a fluke.

"Congratulations to some of you who scored perfectly across the board. Not only that, I would like to commend everyone for passing with flying colors," she said.

"Hell yeah!" Ken cheered after seeing his scores.

"No one failed, huh? What was the passing grade, Sensei?" asked Horikita.

"Oh, you're curious? The passing grade this time was 44 points."

Ken still had the lowest overall score, but they were much higher than his mock test results. His lowest score, English, was still 68 points. Ken was a whole 24 points above it.

"44 points..." Horikita muttered with a slightly confused



expression.

"I can tell you how the passing grade is calculated." Chabashira-sensei grabbed a piece of chalk and started writing on the blackboard. "Each class will have its own class average score for each subject. Let's take the subject with the lowest average score, which is English. If we take every one of your scores, we'll get an average of 87.55 points. If we divide that by 2, we'll get 43.78 points. Round it off accordingly, and the passing grade for English would be 44 points. The passing grade for every other subject was also 44 points, which is convenient."

The explanation was easy to digest, so the class nodded understandingly.

"That makes sense," said Hirata.

Chabashira-sensei lets everyone enjoy their high exam scores. As our homeroom teacher, it was natural for Chabashira-sensei to be proud of her students.

"Well then, I guess that's it for the results. Take your seats and keep quiet because the next class will start soon," she reminded. "Goodbye."

When class ended, my schedule instantly became jam-packed. I was supposed to hang out with the Ayanokouji Group to celebrate Ken's survival. Then, at a later time, the tutors will be celebrating as a group, too. I haven't even mentioned the amount invites I got from my other classmates...

Regardless, the first hurdle has been overcome. I guess it wouldn't do any harm if I improved my interpersonal relationships even more.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*What happens if Kiyotaka revealed his abilities from the start?*

*Suzune - She looks at him with respect and considers his opinions seriously. Kiyotaka's constant reminders and advice made Suzune a bit more open-minded and easier to approach. His insistence on treating her as a friend made her walls crumble slightly. That said, due to his secretive nature, she still doesn't trust him completely.*

*Kikyō - Because of Kiyotaka's actions on the bus, they became each other's first friends in ANHS. Ultimately, Kiyotaka managed to bring Kikyō to his side by playing the game of trust.*

*Ken - Kiyotaka's action to save the class on the first day managed to get him a bit of Ken's respect. Kiyotaka capitalized on this and*



*befriended Ken to keep him under control, judging that his wild and hostile nature will be detrimental to the class.*

*These were the three main characters whose developments changed drastically due to Kiyotaka's actions.*

*This marks the end of Volume 1. Please look forward to Volume 2.*



## SS.3 - Kushida Kikyuu: Only For This Moment

"Fuu..." I sighed deeply before finally pressing the doorbell.

After a couple of seconds later, he finally opened up.

"Kushida, come in," he said in his usual dull tone.

He's always been like this. Ever since I first met him, Ayanokouji-kun lacked personality in his voice. Everyone's first impression of him will always be a gloomy loner who doesn't know how to talk with other people.

The moment I entered his room, the stress I'd bottled up for the last three days resurfaced in my mind. I instantly felt weak and infuriated. This was also the reason why I'm in Ayanokouji-kun's room right now. I wanted to let out some steam.

After I removed my shoes, I saw Ayanokouji-kun standing there, waiting for me.

"You can go ahead and use the bed, Kushida. I'll just sit somewhere."

I approached Ayanokouji-kun without stopping. I bumped into him, leaning my forehead on his broad chest.

"Kushida?" he asked.

"My bad. I just felt like absolute shit after today and it was really tiring..." I replied.

"I see," he answered, not saying anything else.

Leaning on him like this... feels really comforting. After a minute or so, I felt Ayanokouji's arm move upward.

"Pat my head and I'll kill you," I threatened in a deep voice.

"I'll do it anyway," He ignored my warning and proceeded to gently ruffle my hair.

"You'll ruin it, Ayanokouji-kun..." I was annoyed by his actions but was too tired to resist.

"You look really drained today, Kushida."

"Yeah..." I pushed his body aside and sat on the bed. "Sit beside me."

Ayanokouji quietly complied and sat on the edge.

"It's so frustrating and annoying, Ayanokouji-kun..." I said. "Two days ago, when my group and Karuizawa-san's group were hanging out, it just felt so annoying!"



He did nothing but stare at me. His face showed no emotion, which would make anyone who sees it think that he's fundamentally indifferent towards everything he was seeing or hearing.

"Some of the girls from their side started harassing Kokoro-chan and Mii-chan. Of course, they weren't blatant about it, but their passive-aggression kinda got out of hand. When I tried to mediate the situation by shifting their attention to something else, those bitches decided to turn on me!" I ranted.

"They started to throw their passive-aggressive jabs at me. I wanted to talk back and shut them up so bad! But I had to fucking endure everything until our groups separated!"

It's just the ugly truth of the interactions between girls. You can act arrogant when you have your reputation and friends behind you and still get away with it. To be honest, I'd probably act unreachable like Karuizawa-san, arrogant like Shinohara-san, or blunt like Maezono-san if I wasn't the Kushida Kikyoo I am now.

"I understand that their actions were driven by peer pressure and social norms, but at the end of the day, they still acted like bitches, and that pisses me off! Like, what? They don't get to act like that when they're not even as cute as me! Their ringleader, Karuizawa-san, just got a big head because she's Hirata-kun's girlfriend! Heh, and of course, the ugly ducklings would wag their tails for her because they can't make names for themselves! Damn it..."

I'm smart enough to judge that they're not bad people per se... But, at that moment in time, I wished for them to die.

When I looked at Ayanokouji-kun's face, his expression remained unchanging. He offered no comforting words nor did he defend the ones I was backstabbing.

"And then..." I went ahead and told him everything I kept inside for the past three days. My hidden thoughts about others, the way I made fun of them in my mind while acting nice, the disgusting creeps that I wish didn't exist, the other bitches that think they're cute when they're not-- all of the putrid and vile secrets I've held in. I released them all and had Ayanokouji-kun hear everything.

After I finished my piece, slightly gasping for air, I lowered my head and leaned it on his shoulder.

"Let me cling to you, only for this moment. But don't get any ideas, Ayanokouji-kun. Just feel thankful that you get to see me like this; miserable and vulnerable. That's what boys like to see anyway, right?" I scoffed at him.

I expected him to bite back and deny whatever I was assuming but...

"It feels liberating, doesn't it?" he commented.



"What?"

"Ever since you were young, your mindset has already been like this, right? That's why you didn't trust anyone. They all thought they knew who Kushida Kikyou was, but you were keeping them at arm's length without them even realizing it. You didn't have anyone in your life who you can truly confide with your deepest and darkest thoughts. A classmate or friend would have a hold over you, so they weren't an option. A family member would reprimand you so they weren't an option either," he narrated.

Liberating, huh?

He's right... My blog was the wrong approach due to its innate risk and yelling everything out loud held the same amount of danger. It's what led Ayanokouji-kun to get an advantage over me in the first place.

"It certainly feels lighter in the chest to have someone listen to me without worrying about the consequences."

"I don't know if there's anyone out there like me, but I'm probably the only option you have right now, anyway. I don't really care if you badmouth or make fun of anyone, even if it's Horikita, Hirata, or my friends," he said.

"You really are cold, aren't you, Ayanokouji-kun?" I scoffed.

"As long as they're not in any danger, I couldn't care less."

This was why I decided to trust Ayanokouji-kun to some extent, even if he knew the entirety of my past. He was even better than me at keeping secrets. After all, my past, my true nature, and my real thoughts on other people weren't weapons for him to use. To Ayanokouji-kun, they were nothing but useless noises that he heard somewhere on the streets.

"What if someone else was badmouthing me? You said you didn't care about hearing people make fun of your friends, right?" I asked without acting cute, nice, or angelic.

On the surface, Ayanokouji-kun was the star student of Class B alongside Hirata-kun. And despite his gloomy appearance, he strives to become friends with everyone, trying his best to engage in conversations and other types of social interactions...

In reality, he was a cold, calculating, and cunning person who only values himself... and...

"Hmm, I'd probably tell you, if I remember it," he answered, still acting indifferent.

-and me, his first friend.



## SS.4 - Ayanokouji Kiyotaka Fans (2)

**Group Chat Name:** A.K. Fans

Total Members: 9

Males: 0

Females: 9

**Class Distribution:**

A: 0

B: 9

C: 0

D: 0

**Names of Members:**

- 2M1I1 (Admin)

- A2S

- DeKai

- Sawako

- Memento

- Nika0

- Ui-tan (*New*)

- T0ka (*New*)

- Yuu-chan (*New*)

**Chatroom:**

[Eyo~!]

[Ayanokouji-kun made my heart flutter again today!] (2M1I1)

[Honestly, same!] (T0ka)

[I want him to stare at me like how he stares at Horikita-san.]  
(A2S)

[Now that I think about it, isn't Horikita-san's seat really  
enviable?!] (Memento)

[True!]

[I can only imagine my life if, like, Ayanokouji-kun is beside me  
everyday...]

[He's just so cool...] (Ui-tan)

[Ayanokouji-kun is really smart, too.] (Yuu-chan)



[I couldn't possibly score that high if it weren't for Ayanokouji-kun's strategy!] (DeKai)

[Ayanokouji-kun's intelligence is on another level, isn't it?] (Nika0)

[As each day passes, it feels like Ayanokouji-kun's becoming more and more unreachable...] (2M1I1)

[I think I'll just confess to him at this point.] (Sawako)

[Ehh, seriously?!] (DeKai)

[Gosh, I wish I had your courage.] (Ui-tan)

[I can understand that decision.]

[Many girls are getting a lot closer to Ayanokouji-kun lately.]

[I'm sure that includes some of us.] (Nika0)

[Yeah!]

[Apparently, their study group got really close.]

[Sakura-san and Hasebe-san are, like, leading in the race right now.] (Ui-tan)

[I still think Horikita-san's 'seatmate' advantage is better.]

[I see them talk a lot.] (T0ka)

[But isn't Kushida-san a lot closer to Ayanokouji-kun?] (A2S)

[It's pretty well-known that they were, like, each other's first friend in school.] (Ui-tan)

[That's so romantic.]

[I wish I had someone like that...] (Yuu-chan)

[As much as it makes me envious, aren't Kushida-san and Ayanokouji-kun, like, the perfect pair?] (Memento)

[Well...]

[They seem close.] (Nika0)

[Hmmm...]

[They're both quite the "unreachables" of our class.]

[Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san were kind of the same, but they ended up together.] (T0ka)

[You think the same thing will happen to Kushida-san and Ayanokouji-kun?] (Memento)

[Now I can understand Sawaka-san's decision better.]

[She's certainly a tough competition.] (Ui-tan)

[Does Kushida-san even like Ayanokouji-kun, though?] (2M1I1)

[I mean, Kushida-san is really nice to everyone.]

[Are there any noticeable special treatments?] (Yuu-chan)

[I don't think so.] (Nika0)

[And then there's Horikita-san, too.] (DeKai)

[Like, Horikita-san is really hard to approach, but she seems to trust Ayanokouji-kun in particular.]

[Or at least, that's how I see it.] (Ui-tan)

[Do you think they're dating in secret?] (2M1I1)



[Ehhh...]  
[That would be something.] (T0ka)  
[While we're all united in admiring Ayanokouji-kun, we're still rivals in the end, huh?] (Nika0)  
[Of course, but don't forget the other classes!] (DeKai)  
[Alright, let's be honest here.]  
[I think Ayanokouji-kun deserves the top spot in the hot guy rankings.]  
[The girls outside our class are blind.] (Ui-tan)  
[I think... I can agree.] (Yuu-chan)  
[True!]  
[Fourth place is too low!]  
[I mean, I guess Hirata-kun deserves his spot.]  
[He's Hirata-kun, after all.]  
[But Ayanokouji-kun should be in the first place, at the very least.] (2M1I1)  
[I admit that Satonaka-kun and Hashimoto-kun are good-looking, but Ayanokouji-kun, overall, is just on another level.] (T0ka)  
[We don't even know if he's already using all of his strength!] (DeKai)  
[If he's still not going all-out...]  
[I won't even, like, know what to think at that point.] (2M1I1)  
[I'd probably just confess and hope for the best.]  
[My heart won't be able to take it if he turned out to be even more amazing than he already is~!] (Ui-tan)

### **Additional Group Chat Settings:**

- Screenshots: Disabled
- Clear Cycle: Every 24 Hours, 6:00 AM

### **Membership Settings:**

- Male: Invite-only
- Female: Visible to all



## SS.5 - Delinquents

May 24th, Monday. It was a normal evening. The Ayanokouji Group was busy studying in my room...

"Phew! That part was tough," said Ken, as he passed his paper to me.

Akito and Airi look pretty drained. Meanwhile, Haruka was already laying her cheeks on the table.

"Let's take a quick break. Rest your brains for a few minutes before we continue," I said.

"Oh, nice!" Ken celebrated.

"Thanks, Kiyopon!" Haruka thanked me, her cheeks still planted on the table.

"How's your club going, Ken?" I asked.

"Oh, it's going pretty great. Even if I took a lot of time off, the seniors were still quite tolerant of me," Ken replied with a smile.

"I see. That's good, then." I turned to Akito. "How about you, Akito?"

"Everything's good in the archery club, too. The seniors and instructors were very lenient."

"Is shooting bows that fun, Miyacchi?" asked Haruka.

"H-Haruka-chan, I think they shoot arrows, not bows," said Airi.

"Ah, is that right? My bad, ehehe." Haruka giggled.

"Haha, Airi's right. And I think it's not about fun. I mean I *am* having fun. I wouldn't do it if it doesn't. But it calms me down more than anything. My mind is at its most focused when I'm doing archery," explained Akito.

"I wonder if that's how Ken-kun and Kiyotaka-kun feel when they're swimming or playing basketball..." Airi mused.

"Hmm... Maybe?" I answered.

"Well, Airi's completely on point in my case. I get pissed off really easily but when it comes to basketball, I tend to think logically way more than I normally do." Ken explained with a wondering expression.

"I hope you adopt that mindset in your everyday life. Even if you're alright to the people in our class, you still got a pretty bad reputation outside," I said.

"That's true. There were a lot of times when I needed to forcefully drag you away because you were about to lash out at some random



student." Akito scoffed, giving Ken a side glance.

"S-Shut up! I'm trying my best, okay?!" Ken said with a slightly embarrassed expression.

"Now that I think about it, aren't you two the same-- being former delinquents and all?" Haruka said.

"Eh? You were a delinquent, Akito?" Ken asked.

"Ugh... You know I don't like talking about that, Haruka." Akito sighed in exhaustion.

"So Akito-kun is good at fighting too?" asked Airi.

"I didn't expect that," I commented.

"Hahaha, isn't it fine to tell everyone, Miyacchi? You've changed already, anyway." Haruka tapped his back with a smile.

"Well yeah, I was a delinquent, but I wasn't really the top dog in our middle school or anything like that," he narrated.

"But you can probably still hold your own in a fight, right?" asked Ken.

"I guess so. I'm not a wimp like Ike or Yamauchi," Akito answered with a shrug.

"Hahaha! You really did 'em some. It's true, though. Those two would probably just turn tail and run during a fight. Add Hondou in there, too." Ken snickered with a huff.

"Ugh... All those perverts did back then was ogle my boobs..." Haruka looked like she just remembered something disgusting.

"I-I was wondering if Ken-kun and Akito-kun were to fight, who would win?" Airi, who didn't seem fond of talking about those guys, changed the topic.

"Oh, nice question, Airi. Wanna slug this out later, Akito? Just for fun." Ken smiled intimidatingly.

"I haven't fought anyone in months, but you should prepare to lose a tooth or two," Akito smirked back with a cool expression.

"E-Eh?! I wasn't-- I didn't have that intention! I was just asking hypothetically!" Airi waved her hands in a panic.

"Haha, what do you think, Kiyopon?" Haruka asked me.

"I wonder. I don't really know their individual strengths so I can't tell," I explained.

"Fufun~. Then how about an arm-wrestling match?"

"Hah? Isn't that just a competition of brute strength? Even I'm aware that Ken is stronger than me on that front." Akito complained, but his lips shifted into a smile. "But I guess that's fine. I kinda wanna see how it goes."

"Woah! As expected of Miyacchi! He doesn't back down!" Haruka clapped her hands in amusement.

Airi and I just looked at each other and shrugged. I guess our short break will be extended.



After moving our things to the side, my dining table was now an arena for their battle. When the two of them got in position, Haruka raised her hand and readied the signal.

"Go~!" she said.

"Hrr-"

"Hnng-"

"Woah..." The three of us absentmindedly watched the battle unfold.

Ken's advantage immediately became apparent, but Akito was holding his own. Even if the position was tilted slightly in Ken's favor, Akito was still making it hard for him to win.

"Hggghh-"

"Grr-!"

*Slam.*

In the end, Ken still won.

"Sigh... I guess that was to be expected." Akito shrugged his shoulders.

"What the hell was that, Akito? You were insanely strong. If ya held on longer with the same amount of strength, I woulda ran out of stamina." Ken ranted with a smile.

"I told you I'm not a wimp," Akito smirked.

"Whoo~! How manly, both of you! How manly!" Haruka nodded her head repeatedly.

"You two were so strong... I feel like my arm would snap if I tried..." Airi commented in a slightly terrified tone.

"I didn't expect Akito to be that resilient. As expected from a former delinquent, I guess," I said.

Ken turned to me like he just remembered something important.

"Shut up, Kiyotaka! Fight me right now! I know you're strong, yourself!" he said with a furious glare.

"Oh, didn't you mention that last time-- that Kiyotaka would pummel you if you fought?" Akito smiled at me curiously.

"Tch, I guess so. Let's test his strength right now." Ken glowered at me with a serious expression.

"Do I really have to?" I asked, knowing that it was a futile question.

"You can do it, Kiyotaka-kun!" Airi cheered timidly.

"Woah~! It's a Kiyopon versus Kencchin match!" Haruka raised her hand as we got into position.

"I'll kill you if you hold back even a little," threatened Ken.

"Fine... But stop glaring at me like that. It's scary."

"You're my rival, so even if you're also my friend, I'll be merciless," Ken said with a determined smile.

And with that, our match started.



"Go~!" Haruka yelled.

"Haaa-! Wai- Wha-?!"

*Slam.*

And I won.

I braced myself for Ken's initial push. After I felt him weaken, I instantly used all of my strength to slam his arm against the table and take the win.

If I immediately pushed as hard as I can and clashed with Ken's initial push, his forearm bone might've snapped in two.

"Whaaat-?!" Even the calm and cool Akito couldn't help but react.

"K-Kiyopon, you were that strong?!" Of course, Haruka was the same.

"S-So strong..." Even Airi's mouth was agape.

"Nice fight, Ken," I said with a thumbs-up.

"Nice fight my ass, Kiyotaka! I didn't have a chance!" Ken yelled indignantly.

"What the hell, dude...? You're insane..." Akito tapped my shoulder.

"Well, that's probably as far as I can go."

"It's more than enough, bastard! You can probably knock anyone out in a few punches!" said the annoyed Ken.

"Even you, Kencchin?" Haruka asked in surprise.

"Probably..." Ken answered with an unsure expression.

"I'm not that strong. It was my technique that beat you," I shrugged.

"Shut it. Technique or not, you beat me convincingly. You're just genuinely strong, Kiyotaka." Ken's angry expression turned into a grin.

"Now I can really believe what you said, Ken. Kiyotaka would most likely pummel us in a fight." Akito laughed bitterly.

"Hah, probably. I'll make sure to land a clean hit before that happens, though!" Ken said, clenching his fists.

At that moment, I felt Haruka and Airi's fixated stares. I think we should go back to studying now. I'm just about done listening to two delinquents talk about fighting me...

### *Author's Notes:*

*Just because Ken is kind and gentle to his friends and classmates, it doesn't mean his wild nature is completely gone. That was the case even in the Y2 Ken. People don't change that easily.*



## Vol. 2: Chapter 1.1 - Questions

My life in the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School was great-- it was amazing. As someone who wants to live a normal high school life, I am very satisfied with how things have been going for the past three months.

Fortunately, my initial fear of becoming a loner didn't come true. I've made lots of friends and have become close with many of them. I thank my socially adept friends like Hirata and Kushida for helping me connect with the whole class.

I've become fairly close with my one and only neighbor, Horikita. Although she still doesn't talk to anyone other than me, she tries her best to cooperate with others when the situation calls for it. Horikita was always a straightforward girl who doesn't sugarcoat her words. However, I advised her to know the difference between being blunt and being harsh.

Sigh... I hope she can start opening up to others soon. I feel bad for our classmates who genuinely wanted to get to know her.

There's also the Ayanokouji Group. We're the kind of friend group that doesn't really observe the usual friend group norms. We hang out if we want, and we leave each other alone if we don't. Well, that's what our group was initially based on as a band of loners. But, the five of us have been really comfortable with each other, and it feels great to belong somewhere.

Having 694 class points, each Class B student enjoyed a round of 69,400 private points for the month of June. At first, we were worried about the decrease in our class points, but it seems like the other classes suffered all the same, albeit to varying degrees.

Right now, it was less than one week before the month of July comes around.

"It's starting to get pretty hot..." I complained, fanning myself with my uniform.

"Certainly, boys have it harder during this season," commented Horikita.

We don't have uniform rotations when seasons change, so boys, with their long, green pants were more vulnerable to heat. Meanwhile, the girls will have it harder during winter because the



school prohibits them from wearing leggings under their skirts. And on a related note, both sexes were equally inconvenienced for their top-wears. After all, even in this heat, we were still required to wear our blazers.

"Do you plan to change your hairstyle, Horikita? Once the season comes around, I think a ponytail would help you feel a little cooler," I said.

"I can handle temperatures quite well, but that's certainly an idea," she pondered.

Now that I'm imagining it, I kinda wanna see Horikita in a ponytail...

"What?" she asked with a glare.

Oops, I guess I started staring at her without my awareness.

"Nothing," I replied, averting my gaze.

When the bell rang and class finally ended, Chabashira-sensei called for me.

"Ayanokouji, come to the faculty with me," she said.

I was ready to speculate on what this will be about, but before other theories came to mind, I remembered one person's name from way back.

"Kiyopon, did you do something?" asked Haruka.

I don't know if her worried expression was real or sarcastic, but I answered honestly regardless.

"I'm not sure. But you guys don't have to wait for me," I replied.

"Ken and I have club," said Akito.

"Haha, I guess it'll be just the two of us today, huh, Airi?" Haruka grabbed Airi's arm with a grin.

When our group split up, Chabashira-sensei led me into a hallway that no student would walk through.

"Is it time?" I asked.

"I guess you didn't forget." Chabashira-sensei gave me a side glance. "You're right, it is time. He wanted to meet you as soon as now."

She knocked on the door of the reception room.

"Chairman, I've brought Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun."

"Please, enter." I heard a man's voice from the inside.

When Chabashira-sensei escorted me in, a man, who looked like he was in his forties, greeted the two of us with an amicable smile.

"Good afternoon, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun. Forgive me for imposing on your time like this," he said.

"If you'll excuse me, Chairman." Chabashira-sensei bowed gracefully before finally leaving the room.

"Firstly, I would like to introduce myself. I'm Sakayanagi, the chairman of the school board. You must be wondering why I asked



for you, right? Please, have a seat."

I sat down and saw that there was a cup of tea waiting for me.

"It's alright, Ayanokouji-kun. While your vigilance is impressive, you don't need to be so guarded in front of me," he said. "Well, that's what I wanted to say, but it should be impossible since it's obvious that I know something about you."

To be honest, I don't really feel like putting my guard up-- at least in the physical sense. Chairman Sakayanagi didn't seem hostile towards me.

"You know who I am, right?" I asked a rhetorical question.

"Yes, actually. I've known you for quite a while now," he nodded. "Ayanokouji-sensei has always spoken highly of you."

Ah, so that's how that mechanism was removed.

"I see, so you also know my father."

"That's right. You can say that he's something like a mentor to me. We haven't met ever since I succeeded my father in this position, however," he narrated before sipping his tea.

"Then, I can also assume that you know about the White Room."

"Yes, I do. I've been there before, as well."

He's really taking this slowly. Perhaps I can go straight to the point while matching his pace.

"Chairman Sakayanagi, is it alright if I confirm something?" I asked.

"Oh, sure, go ahead."

"You called me here to talk about my admission, right? After all, you'd know that my father wouldn't be happy about it."

"Hmm... Well, I guess you're a bit off. I certainly knew that Ayanokouji-sensei would be opposed to your enrollment, but that's precisely why I made sure you were admitted if you pass the entrance exam and interview," he explained. "After all, as someone who shares my father's mission and views, we'll give any worthy student our education if they so desired."

Is that really the case...?

"According to my understanding; outsiders, even immediate family, weren't allowed to have any contact with the students until they graduate. I'll be honest and say that that was my number one reason for enrolling here. I wanted a peaceful high school life away from that man and that place," I narrated.

"Of course, I knew that. We've indirectly communicated through your entrance exams, right? You scored 50 points in every subject, indicating that you didn't want to stand out."

"Yes, that was my original goal."

"Ahh, I see... So it changed, after all."

"And that's also the main reason why you called me here, right?"



"Haha... As expected of you, I guess. You're right. I wanted to clear up some things," he said. "Why did you give up on living an obscure life? I even pushed your placement in Class D for that reason."

"As I said, that was my original goal... but I felt like I wouldn't be able to experience this so-called *"high school life"* to the fullest if I did things halfheartedly."

"Oh, is that right?"

"Yes, I decided to test myself against the real world by using this school as a simulation of sorts."

"Well, I can understand that viewpoint, but isn't the answer clear already? You are someone from the White Room, a specimen capable of feats that any normal person in this world could only dream of accomplishing."

"Please don't sell the students of your school so short, Chairman Sakayanagi. I'm sure there are a few students in this school that could pose a challenge to me."

"Hahaha, it actually terrifies me how you can say such arrogant words without a hint of arrogance," he laughed heartily.

Horikita said the same thing. Well, I guess that's understandable when you're just stating something factual.

"Well, we can probably skip all other layers and get straight to it." The light in Chairman Sakayanagi's eyes changed. "Can you please tell me what your goal is, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun?"

Seeing those eyes, I can only respond in kind.

"All of the things I've said were nothing but truths. I want to test myself and I want to live a satisfying high school life." I gave Chairman Sakayanagi a piercing look. "But other than those, I want to quench my insatiable curiosity. What is friendship? What is love? What is freedom? Even with the amount of things they've taught me in the White Room, there were a lot of fundamental concepts that I couldn't possibly learn in that environment."

*Are people equal or not?*

I've thought about it in length during that bus ride back in April. Modern progressiveness has been advocating such a thought.

"No, *we are not equal.*" That is my answer to that question. People are inherently different, so they should also take on different roles. Equality does not exist. Because I managed to see the outside world, I could finally confirm that question with my own two eyes.

There are many things in this world that I have yet to understand. My boundless curiosity is just waiting to be sated.

"I see," he sighed. "I'll take that as you saying that you simply wish to learn. Unfortunately, I cannot do anything to overturn your placement at this point, even if you wanted to transfer into a higher



class."

"It's fine, Chairman Sakayanagi."

"Haha, I see. Well, you can consider it a handicap. And you're right behind the promised Class A now, so I guess it didn't really matter. You figured out how to take advantage of the S-System on the first day, after all," he nodded in approval.

Finally, I took a sip of my tea.

"I guess you can go back now, Ayanokouji-kun. Please attend this school to your heart's content."

After I placed my cup down, I faced the chairman once again.

"If it's alright, Chairman Sakayanagi, I would also like some clarifications on a few things."

When he heard my words, I noticed an imperceptible change in the chairman's eyes.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 1.2 - A Tool from the Inside

"Clarifications, is it?" he asked.

"Well, if it's going to be an inconvenience for you, then please forget I asked."

"Ah-haha. It's quite alright, Ayanokouji-kun. Please tell me your inquiries."

I took another sip of my tea before heading on to my first question.

"Earlier, you said that *"you made sure I was admitted"* if I pass the entrance exam and interview. I found that strange and incredibly incoherent. Even if you're the chairman of the school, you shouldn't be able to influence the admission of a student if their enrollment was solely based on their entrance exam and interview. That is, unless, they didn't really matter in the first place."

"So you're saying that I was lying about the entrance exam and interview-- that all I needed were my own words to get you admitted? Well, I can understand that. After all, you're a special kind of student."

"It's alright if you don't want to confirm it."

"No, it seems like you already believe it to be the truth, so I'll just admit it. You're right, Ayanokouji-kun. Your entrance exams didn't really matter. When I saw your name in the list of enrollees, I made sure that you can attend this school," he sighed. "It's not like you weren't qualified, anyway."

"Thank you."

"Hahaha, no need to thank me now. I wouldn't neglect your desire to study here just because your origins are different from that of normal people."

"There's one more thing, chairman."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I may be a special case... but the matter of my admission here isn't really special, wasn't it?"

"What do you mean?" He cocked his head.

"A lot of students- no, all of the students in this school were already pre-determined to get admitted, is what I'm trying to say."

After hearing my words, the chairman's eyes narrowed, but his



smile didn't break.

"Do you have some evidence to back this claim up?"

"I was placed in Class D, which was deemed to be the collection of defective students. I've always wondered why this type of class existed. This school is popular throughout the entire country and a lot of capable students enroll every year, numbering hundreds, if not thousands, or even tens of thousands," I explained. "However, the population is always 160 freshmen students per year, and I'd believe said system if all of them were the most capable 160 students that have passed both the entrance exam and interview. After attending this school for the past three months, it was pretty obvious that this wasn't the case at all."

The chairman continued listening to my explanation.

"I have classmates with academic abilities so low that average junior high school students would score better than them in our previous midterm exams. Their entrance exam results should've been at the bottom of the barrel, so how were they admitted if their chances of enrollment relied on it? The interviews, perhaps? I have a classmate who wore his personality like a hat. He was a destructive and violent student with little to no patience. His interview results should've been disastrous. Of course, his academic abilities were also atrocious. The only thing he had going for him was his superb athletic abilities."

"Then, wouldn't you conclude that we took note of that and allowed him to pass?" he mused.

"That statement only strengthens my argument. Apart from the mandatory medical tests that we needed to take in order to apply, there weren't any exams involving physical abilities. Your statement also implies that this school and their previous schools were in some sort of contact. After all, you wouldn't normally know much about a student's full capabilities and school history based on their application papers alone."

We stared at each other for a brief moment. Silence enveloped the room but I'm sure neither of us felt any pressure. At this point, Chairman Sakayanagi could only sigh.

"Alright, Ayanokouji-kun. Ever since you asked me about the entrance exams, I knew our conversation would eventually end up in this direction. You don't need to explain any further. After all, it seems like you already have an accurate idea of how the admission works in this school."

"Not really. I'd still want you to clarify everything to me, but since I'm just a student, I can understand if you reject my request."

"No, it's alright. I'll still tell you what I can. After all, I believe that you'll keep everything to yourself."



I nodded. Chairman Sakayanagi took a good long sip of his tea before facing me once more.

"First of all, you were right about the entrance exams and interviews. They're nothing but a farce-- a smokescreen if you will. We conduct surveys throughout the country and identify the most suitable candidates for enrollment. As you suspected, everyone's admission was already pre-determined. It doesn't matter if they get a zero on their entrance exam or insult the interviewer during the interview."

His words weren't that surprising. Students like Ken, Ike, and Yamauchi were admitted for some reason. There should've been a lot of enrollees who were worthier of their slots if we're basing it solely on overall merit.

"But dear lord, Ayanokouji-kun. You really are far above any student of your age. One simple mistake in my words led you to figure everything out... Sensei's education served you well, it seems."

"Probably."

"Will you be alright? Other students or even teachers would start getting suspicious of your origins if you continue showing your abilities," he asked.

"I've taken that into account, Chairman Sakayanagi. Unless they get the answer out of me directly, they wouldn't be able to guess the existence of a place such as the White Room. I don't intend to get my father in trouble or anything," I answered.

The chairman's next words earned my attention.

"I see... Well, your father has already contacted the school a bunch of times," he said.

"That much is to be expected."

"Yes, he wanted you to drop out immediately. Of course, the school didn't agree with this."

"As expected of an institution ran by the government."

"Sensei is a powerful man. He won't stop until he gets you back."

"The only thing I can do is not agree with him. The legal matters are on your hands, Chairman Sakayanagi."

"Yes, I'll be sure to deliver. After all, you're a student of this school," he said. "I'm sure you still have some questions, but that's all I can tell you right now. In the end, you're still just a student. In time, you'll understand the kind of nurturing policy we strive for, and the effect we hope it will produce."

I finally stood up and prepared to leave.

"Thank you for today, Chairman Sakayanagi," I bowed.

"I expect great things from you in this school, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm sure you'll have fun trying to overtake Class A," he said before



chuckling.

"Is there someone in particular that I'm supposed to be worried about?" I asked.

"I'm not sure how she'll fare against you, but my daughter is quite capable," he smiled.

"Your daughter is in Class A?"

"Hahaha, don't worry. Her placement wasn't biased or anything. She was evaluated using the same set of rules."

"I didn't think that at all. I was merely interested."

"I'm sure you two will get along. She knows about your identity as someone from the White Room, after all."

That statement put a crack in my composure.

"I see..." I said as my eyes narrowed.

Fundamentally, our classes were still enemies. Depending on what kind of person the chairman's daughter is, she can use her knowledge about me as leverage. Of course, it wouldn't really cause any real threats. If she's smart, she wouldn't expose her knowledge of the White Room to outsiders. What I'm worried about is a completely different thing.

"You don't have to be too cautious, Ayanokouji-kun. My daughter will fight you fair and square."

I won't heed his words this time. I should be careful in dealing with this daughter of his...

"Alright, you may leave now. Please keep doing your best from now on."

"Please excuse me," I bowed once more.

As I stepped out of the reception office, I saw Chabashira-sensei waiting for me some distance away.

"How did it go?" she asked with a smirk.

"The chairman really did a mistake, huh?" I said.

"What?" Chabashira-sensei was visibly confused by my sudden words.

"He intended to help me live a life of obscurity because he judged that I didn't want to stand out. Class D, it's subpar students, and a teacher like you would've been the perfect place for that."

"A teacher like me?" Chabashira-sensei turned with a glare.

"Yeah, you were someone who looked indifferently towards the class standings. You didn't pressure your students into performing better. At least, that's what it seemed like on the surface. If I really decided to hide my abilities, I'm sure you would've done something to urge me into helping. After all, you're aware that I'm more than what I'd seem. And of course, you desire Class A more than anyone," I explained.

Chabashira-sensei seemed displeased with my words, but I



couldn't care less.

"Hmph, I wouldn't deny that, Ayanokouji. But you've made the right decision. I'm looking forward to your journey towards Class A."

"I want to make some things clear, Chabashira-sensei." I stopped walking, prompting her to turn back and look at me.

This time, I looked at Chabashira-sensei with cold piercing eyes.

"You may be using me as your ticket to Class A, but to me, your desire is nothing more than a byproduct of my goals. Since I'm already doing you a favor, please make sure that you can be of use to me, as well."

"Heh, those words aren't necessarily the most respectful, especially towards a teacher," she scoffed. "But sure. You've been giving me better results than I could ever expect. Buying the explanation on the S-System and getting those old test questions? Based on those feats alone, it's obvious that you're not an ordinary kid."

I thought I acted inconspicuously, but she still found out about the old test questions.

"I'm not against a symbiotic relationship."

"The true Ayanokouji Kiyotaka amuses me," she laughed before glaring back at me.

I walked in the opposite direction and never looked back.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 2.1 - The World Discovers Light

I was once living in a dark, lonely world-- I was by myself-- I was alone.

It was my fault, to begin with. Interacting with people was just too hard for me. I can't talk to anyone while making proper eye contact. I'm also horrible with crowds. I was nothing but a no-good girl.

I continued living in that dark, lonely world. After all, I was fine by myself-- I was fine being alone.

I loved solitude.

However, even I am aware that one single person cannot live in isolation for all of eternity. I was at a loss on what I was supposed to do. I'm a hopeless person who can't even talk to strangers without stuttering.

That's why I adopted a persona. It was the solution I thought of and it also opened my eyes. If I acted out a different version of myself, my true self would be able to live peacefully in that dark, lonely world. While doing that, a question popped up in my mind. Is everyone else putting on a facade, just like me? Or are they showing their true selves to the outside world? I always thought that finding out the answers to those questions was something that I could only ever dream of. But everything changed when I attended this school.

I met them.

I met the people that can connect with me, the true me.

They were people that I can call *friends*. They were like the light to me-- the ones who brightened up my dark, lonely world.

As I thought about those bittersweet thoughts and happy memories, I heard some noises coming from the other hallway.

"The hell do you want, Komiya, Kondou? And who's this?"

Ken-kun? What is he...? Those boys look unfamiliar. They were from another class.

"I heard you were being an arrogant bitch, Sudou," said the third guy.

"Heh, that's right, Ishizaki. Sudou's been acting pretty cocky



lately."

"Now he's extra cocky just because the instructor talked about making him a regular."

They mocked Ken-kun, which would obviously make him angry. This is bad-! There are three of them so Ken-kun might be in trouble.

I-I should...

"Say that again, you assholes. Don't think that I'm scared of you just because I'm alone."

Oh no, Ken-kun didn't look like he was planning to run away...

Come on, Airi... Just please move your body... Your friend is in trouble...

I need to help Ken-kun...

But what can someone like me do?

"Tch. We'll put you in your place today." One of the guys ran up and tried to punch Ken-kun.

He dodged, but before could punch back-

"Ken-kun!" I called out from the top of my lungs.

"W-What the-?!"

"There's someone!"

The guys against him instantly panicked.

"Airi?" Ken-kun asked in surprise when he saw me.

"The hell? Is that chick your girlfriend, Sudou?"

I thought they were going to make fun of him, but their faces were full of worry.

"Hah? She's my friend," he replied. "Airi, get the hell outta here! I can handle these guys!"

That's not the point!

"D-Don't! P-Please stop fighting, Ken-kun!"

Kiyotaka-kun was afraid that something like this would eventually happen.

"Shit, what do we do, Ishizaki?"

"Damn it... This isn't gonna work. Let's get outta here."

With that, the three of them walked out of the special building at a brisk pace.

"Wha-- Hey! The hell? Are you three acting afraid now, huh?!" Ken-kun yelled in anger.

"Ken-kun, p-please don't pick a fight!" I said.

He approached me after picking his bag up.

"I told you, Airi. I could've handled those guys alone. You didn't have to worry." He put his thumbs up with a smile.

"No... T-That's not it, Ken-kun. Kiyotaka-kun, Akito-kun- all of us always reminded you to restrain yourself from doing things like that, right?" Before I knew it, I was already scolding him.



This was the first time I've ever done something like this. I was caught up in the heat of the moment. I became scared. Ken-kun might get angry at me instead.

"That's-!" He scratched his head while looking away. "That's true... but it wasn't my fault this time! You clearly saw them throw the first punch, right?"

I nodded.

"Sigh... You know what, Airi, since you're already here, just come with me. Let's meet up with Akito. He's probably finished with his archery club now." Ken-kun turned around and walked away.

I didn't have the chance to decline.

"W-Wait a minute, Ken-kun!" I yelled, trodding after him.

As the two of us walked out of the building, I sighed after remembering that I didn't get any good pictures today. However, I'm happy that my friend didn't get hurt...



## Vol. 2: Chapter 3.1 - The Closest

"So you're saying that a guy named Katsuragi and a girl named Sakayanagi are leading Class A?"

"Mhm, but according to my friend, there seems to be some kind of rift between the two of them, to the point where one side is called the *"Katsuragi Faction"* while the other is called the *"Sakayanagi Faction"*."

So the chairman's daughter is the leader of Class A, or at least one of them, huh? Well, I guess that's not too surprising.

"I see... And a guy named Ryuen is ruling Class D with an iron fist of some sort?"

"Yep~!"

"Ah, I see..." I pondered. "Hey, that tickles, Kushida."

Kushida and I were currently leaning on each other's backs. I was sitting on the edge of the bed while she sat in the middle. She was amusing herself by stepping both of her feet on the wall, using my back as her support to carry herself off the ground. Kushida's weird movements resulted in her hair hitting and brushing against my nape, which tickles.

"Sigh... It was quite hard to get that information, you know? I had to manipulate the conversation without being too suspicious about it," she pouted.

"Knowing you, I'm sure you pulled it off without a hitch," I said.

"The girls in Class D lacked vigilance, so they were pretty easy. In Class A, however... I felt like my words and movements were under watch for some reason."

Kushida's network is really powerful. I can practically access any social information without putting myself on the frontline.

"Why do you want to know about the so-called *'leaders'* of Class A and D now? Are you so bored that you want to go on the offensive yourself?" she asked.

"No, it's just that I don't know anything about them at all. If I move carelessly, I might get in trouble," I explained.

"Hmm... Really? I think if it's you, you'd win no matter who you're up against."

Kushida's voice was deeper than usual, but she didn't sound hostile. Judging by her tone, I can tell that she truly meant those words.



"You overestimate me, Kushida."

"Stop humble-bragging, idiot."

After a brief moment of silence, Kushida spoke once again.

"Are you sure about being on friendly terms with Class C? Ichinose-san is an excellent student, and her class is a monolith at this point. I don't think they'll overtake us that easily since our class average on the midterm exam was very high, but they're still just a mere 121 class points away from us," she said.

I nodded in agreement.

The best immediate course of action for Class B is to widen the gap against Class C. The four of us have talked about this before--about widening the gap through the Special Exams. Of course, we don't know *when* that will happen or *what* will happen, for that matter.

"I think it's fine. The two of us are pretty close with Ichinose-san and her class. Continuing a non-hostile relationship with them shouldn't have any immediate consequences. And it's not like we're keeping our guards down."

"I guess that makes sense. Having an ally is better anyway," Kushida said with a sigh.

*Stretch.*

*Fold.*

*Stretch.*

*Fold.*

I hunch forward whenever she stretches her legs and then lean back right after. Even if I wasn't looking behind me, our joint movements give away what action Kushida was doing.

She was finished with her rant, so right now, the two of us just decided to hang out. It was a Friday, anyway.

"There's one thing that I wanted to address for a while, now, Ayanokouji-kun."

She finally sat back down, comfortably resting her back on mine.

"Hm?"

"When will you start calling me by my first name?"

"Your first name?"

"You only got to know Miyake-kun and the rest of your friends during the study group assignment, but you're already so close that you call each other by your first names. Hasebe-san even got that nickname for you... The girls were in an uproar for a while because of that, you know?" she explained. "We may not hang out that often in the recent times-- being in different friend groups and all-- but people won't really find it weird if we call each other by our first names at this point, right?"

"You're probably right. It's not like I'm against it or anything. I



just haven't thought of it," I said.

"Then, I'll call you Kiyotaka-kun, and you should call me Kikyou!"  
Kushida-- no, Kikyou cheered with a cute smile.

"Sure, Kikyou," I replied.

She nodded happily before finally standing up. I reflexively looked behind me.

"-?"

"Kyah-?!"

Since Kikyou was standing so close to me on my bed, my face accidentally bumped on her thighs when I turned my head around. They were incredibly soft and smooth. It's hard to believe that she was another person like me.

"Hey, what-?! Stop being a pervert! Taking advantage of me like this..." Kikyou glared at me.

She hastily paced down off the bed.

"Sorry, that wasn't my intention." It was an accident. All I can do is apologize.

"I know, pervert. But you're still a pervert," she said, sticking her tongue out to me.

"What..."

"Alright, I'll be heading out now. I need to talk with some of my friends after this."

I thought she was angry and offended, but apparently, that wasn't the case. The flexibility (or more like volatility) of this girl's mood is something else.

Kikyou grabbed her bag and put on her shoes like business was done.

"It almost feels like your only goal here was the first-name thing," I said.

"Hmph, of course, that much was obvious. The girls would start losing respect for me if the role of *"the closest girl to Ayanokouji Kiyotaka"* gets taken by someone else," she replied with a haughty smile.

So I'm a symbol of status now?

"Well, if we considered all the factors, I guess you are the girl who's closest to me."

"Mhm~!" she nodded. "And if only Hasebe-san and Sakura-san get to call you by your first name, that wouldn't be good for my image, right?"

"Yes, yes, I understand. Now get out of here," I said.

I grabbed Kikyou's shoulders from the back and slowly pushed her to the door.

"Ehh? Why are you so adamant about sending me away this time? Didn't you just enjoy the fragrance and suppleness of my thighs?"



How cruel!" she protested.

"That's why I'm throwing you out. I won't be able to calm down if you stay here," I said.

Those words instantly piqued Kikyou's interest.

"Really? Did I make your heart race? Are you flustered?" A rapid barrage of questions ensued.

"I'm just a normal guy. That much is natural, right?"

"Hmm~? Just say it straight if you're falling for me, Kiyotaka-kun~," teased Kikyou.

"I'm not. Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Ow-!" Kikyou cried after I softly flicked her forehead. "That was uncalled for!"

"Whatever, Kikyou. I'll see you tomorrow."

When she walked out of the door, Kikyou turned around to tell me one more thing.

"Thanks again for today, Kiyotaka-kun. Bye-bye." And there she goes.

When I laid my body on the bed, I checked the plans I'd made for this weekend.

"That sure is a lot..." I muttered.

- A meet-up with Horikita (Final Exam Prep)
- Hang out with the Ayanokouji Group
- Hirata and I tagging along on Karuizawa and her friend's summer outfit shopping
- Trying out a new game with Ijuuin, Professor, and Miyamoto and many others...



## Vol. 2: Chapter 3.2 - Small Steps

July 1st, Thursday. It was the start of a new month, and the new class standings will be released to the students.

"Good morning, Class B." Chabashira-sensei came in with her usual despondent face.

Without wasting a moment, she pasted the poster displaying the class points of each freshman class.

"Sensei... Our class points have gone up, haven't they?" Hirata asked nervously.

"That's right." Chabashira-sensei lightly tapped the blackboard after she finished sticking the magnets. "Well, take a look."

Class A: 1004 cl (+ 94)

Class B: 789 cl (+ 95)

Class C: 663 cl (+ 90)

Class D: 492 cl (+ 82)

"Oh! We got the highest increase in points!"

"Ayanokouji-kun's strategy is the best!"

"We're getting there!" they cheered.

"Congratulations. Your class has once again closed its distance with Class A." Chabashira-sensei praised us with a satisfied smile.

All of us received 78,900 private points this morning-- a big increase from the 69,400 points that we got in June. We discussed it in the class group chat and in the classroom earlier but of course, we could only be a hundred percent sure once Chabashira-sensei finally confirmed it herself.

"Yes, Horikita?" Chabashira-sensei entertained Horikita, who was raising her hand.

"Chabashira-sensei, I just found it odd that we were awarded points so quickly," she said.

"Ah, is that so? Well, you don't have to think too much about it. It might've been the school's way of rewarding the first-year students for passing the midterms," she answered.

"I see," Horikita sat back down.

The rest of the classes nodded understandingly upon hearing Sensei's response.

"The school can be kind sometimes, huh?" Ike commented with a grin.

"You can expect the same thing for your Final Exam at the end of



July. The results of the test will be given right after getting checked, but the rewards might be given on October 1st."

So the points will be given one month after the exam was taken, huh?

At that moment, Matsushita also raised her hand curiously. She stood up after Chabashira-sensei acknowledged her.

"Sensei, is it alright if I ask Class A's class average for the exam?"

If she didn't raise her hand, I would've asked that question to her later myself.

"If I remember correctly, there's was 85."

Horikita and I immediately looked at each other.

"*This is bad,*" we thought-- or at least, I think we thought of the same thing.

"I understand... And these rewards came with the deductions, right?" Matsushita followed up with another question.

"Of course," Sensei nodded. "The same thing applies every month."

I observed my classmates after Chabashira-sensei gave her reply, and finally got an idea of who were the sharpest students in the class.

After another normal day, I was finally back in my room. I read the list that Chabashira-sensei gave me a while back-- the list of first-year students with their names and faces.

"I thought the chairman would see through my act, but I guess that wasn't the case," I murmured.

Because of this list, I already knew about the existence of Sakayanagi Arisu, beforehand. I just didn't want him to ask unnecessary questions that would lead to suspicion.

What caught me off-guard was Sakayanagi Arisu's knowledge about me and the White Room.

Sakayanagi Arisu, Katsuragi Kouhei, Ichinose Honami, and Ryuuen Kakeru, huh? They were the big names of our rival classes. Once I get to know how they work, and how their closest companions work, I won't need to lurk in the backstage anymore.

I said that I would be able to act more freely in the shadows, but the opposite is actually much better in one condition: *I must know about my enemies first*. Once I do that, it won't matter even they target me all they want. I can prepare and guard myself with little to no errors.

Snapping my mind back into reality, I remembered that I needed to prepare for my Sunday plans with my friends...



## Vol. 2: Chapter 3.3 - Mingling Natures

12:32 PM, Keyaki Mall.

"Oh, Kiyotaka."

When I got to our meeting spot, Akito was already there, waiting.

"Sorry for making you wait," I said.

"Nah, I just got here."

For some reason, I felt like I was Akito's girlfriend with those words.

"Oh, look. It's Airi and Haruka."

"Hey, you two!" Haruka called out to us.

Haruka and Airi looked very attractive in their casual outfits. From an outsider's perspective, it must've looked like we're on a double date. Or at least, that's what my delusional, single self wants to say.

"Good afternoon, Akito-kun, Kiyotaka-kun," Airi greeted us with a timid voice.

Unfortunately, Ken was doing club stuff today, so he couldn't come with us. Even if it was a Sunday, he still works hard on basketball, probably to make up for the lost time.

After a short while, the four of us settled down to eat lunch in a sushi restaurant.

"Fuuu~! These are delicious. Kencchin is missing out!" commented Haruka.

"Oh, speaking of Ken, didn't he almost fight the guys from Class D?" Akito asked, looking at Airi for confirmation.

A fight?

"Ah... Yes, I was there when it almost happened the day before yesterday," she replied.

"Ken was prattling about how he could beat the three of them. He said he wouldn't be in trouble since they threw the first punch," he shrugged.

"Ehh, what Kencchin-thing to do and say."

"You stopped them, Airi?" I asked.

"I-I didn't really stop them... I just called out to Ken-kun and the three boys from Class D just left." Airi then proceeded to tell the story in detail.

I see... Komiya Kyogo, Kondou Reo, and Ishizaki Daichi, huh? According to Airi, it seems like a beef between club rivals...



Wait, they stopped after seeing Airi...?

"You were all in the special building, right?"

"Yes..." she nodded. "I was trying to take some pictures when I heard them."

"Ah! So you got new ones, Airi? Show them to me later!" Haruka leaned in cheerfully.

"Seriously, that idiot. He might be good at fighting, but Ishizaki can probably hold his own with two other goons behind him," said Akito.

It sounds like Akito knows who Ishizaki Daichi is.

Of course, everyone in the Ayanokouji Group knows about Airi's hobby. That's also why Ken wasn't too shocked when he saw her there.

Anyway, it was a three-on-one. It happened in the special building. They panicked when they saw Airi instead of making fun of Ken or targeting her instead. They also left even with Ken provoking them on the way out. Something's odd here.

I needed that one detail before I can confirm my hunch.

"But still, isn't it amazing that Kencchin might be a regular?! He's just a first-year!" Haruka exclaimed.

"Yeah, whenever I catch him on the court, even I can tell that his skills are top-notch." Akito nodded in agreement.

Well, Ken is quite talented when it comes to sports, especially basketball.

After eating, the four of us watched a movie. Most of them were screenings of movies from four years ago, though.

We saw an interesting superhero movie that involved epic adventures in outer space and other planets. I'm glad I watched its prequel because the movie we watched was the second one. The Japanese dub wasn't available in theaters, so I spent our remaining hang-out time explaining the things that my three friends didn't fully understand.

"The Japanese subtitles were a bit scuffed on that part. Can you explain it to me, Kiyopon?" Haruka asked while indulging in her ice cream.

"Ah, the villain revealed that he was also the cause of the protagonist's mother's brain tumor. He was the one who planted it in her head," I said.

"I knew it! And I almost forgot that his mother died of cancer!"

"Ohh, b-but what about on the part where-" Airi also had her questions.

I explained some more things to them before we finally ran out of snacks to munch on.



"I'm sure the subtitles will be updated soon. It's just the first day, after all," said Akito.

"Hehe~. Good thing we had an English genius like Kiyopon for clarifications!" Haruka said with a smirk.

"Isn't Kiyotaka-kun a genius in everything, though?" Airi added.

"Aha! That's true!"

"Now, I'm not that worried about the final exams this month," Akito shrugged with grin.

"Don't slack off on your studies now," I said.

"Hahaha! Of course, we won't~!"

I checked the clock the moment our plans were finished. It was already 3:43 PM.

"Airi, is it alright if you come with me after this? I want your help with something?" I asked.

"Eh? Me...? For what?" Of course, Airi got confused.

"We'll head to the special building," I answered.

Haruka and Akito instantly got interested.

"Oh, is our Kiyopon planning something?" Haruka grinned.

"I don't exactly know why you wanna go there all of a sudden, Kiyotaka, but it's about Ken's fight, isn't it?" Akito asked.

I nodded.

And with that, the four of us headed to the special building.

"This is the place?" I asked.

"Uhm, yes. This is it. I was initially hiding in that corner over there," answered Airi.

"Hmm... I see... I think I understand what's going on here."

"W-What you are thinking about, Detective Ayanokouji?" Haruka acted like a nervous news reporter, miming a mic near my mouth.

"Ken's encounter with those guys was deliberate and planned," I replied. "In other words, we're being attacked by Class D."

"Eh-?! So it wasn't just a normal brawl between meatheads, after all-?!" Haruka asked in surprise.

"Hmm... I think I can get where you're coming from, but can you explain how you concluded it, Kiyotaka?" Akito thought of something on his own, but couldn't quite put everything together.

"Then before that, can you tell me anything about Ishizaki? You know who he is, right?" I asked.

"Ah, yeah. That guy was a troublemaker around our area back in middle school," he answered.

"I see... Then I guess everything fits," I nodded before trying to explain. "Firstly, there were three of them. Komiya and Kondou knew about Ken's nature-- being clubmates and all. They brought Ishizaki to spur Ken into fight mode."



The three listened intently.

"According to Airi, Komiya charged in first to punch Ken. But something was odd about that. If they really wanted to teach Ken a lesson, they should've hounded him at the same," I explained before looking at Airi.

"So you're saying that they didn't intend to *'beat him up'?*" Akito tilted his head skeptically.

"Yes, it's weak evidence on its own, but we'll return to it later. The next thing that I found strange was their reaction to Airi's presence. Normally, they'd use Airi to provoke him even more. But instead of doing that, they just left," I added.

"A-Ah, yes! That's what I thought back then, too! I thought they were going to make fun of us when they asked if I was Ken-kun's girlfriend... But their faces were full of concern," Airi nodded strongly.

"The last piece of evidence that I needed was the location itself. Come with me." I began walking towards the Chemistry Laboratory and other utility rooms.

"Every room of in the first and second floors are equipped with security cameras. But, here, on the third floor, only a handful of rooms have them. And as you can see, none of them can be found in the hallways," I said, pointing up at some parts of the ceiling with unused power outlets.

I continued talking while the three of them looked up to check every inch of the ceiling.

"If you haven't noticed it yet, our rooms are also equipped with security cameras. They wouldn't be able to accurately assess our behaviors if there weren't any. The teachers can't do that while discussing the lessons."

"S-So that's why our points still drop by a lot..." Haruka said.

"You're guilty, aren't you?" Akito asked with a smug smirk.

"I-I can't help it sometimes! My brain shuts off during language subjects." Haruka replied with a guilty expression.

To be honest, I was surprised by our 26-point decrease in June, and it's not too good this time, either. Our class average during the exam was approximately 88 points. I don't know the exact metrics for the conversation, but if Class A only had 85 points, then the deductions were obviously the reason why we only had a 1-point lead during the additions.

According to Chabashira-sensei, each class gained at least a hundred class points before the deductions were applied. In other words, our deductions for this month were way more than last month.

"But going back to your investigation, Kiyotaka-kun... What were



Ishizaki-san and his friends' goal?" Airi asked.

"Well, this is just my speculation, but if you add everything together... They called Ken to an inconspicuous place and tried to *'fight'* him. They deliberately tried to throw the fight, letting Ken beat them up. Since there were no security cameras around, they can report what happened to the teachers and claim to be the victims even if they threw the first punch. Of course, it wouldn't work because Airi was there and she saw everything happen. She could counteract as Ken's witness. That's why they left instead of doing anything else," I said.

Airi and Haruka had perplexed expressions.

"The sanctions for violence should be heavy, right? Are they trying to get Ken expelled or something?" Haruka asked nervously.

"I wouldn't say expelled, but they might suspend Ken. It would also cut his chances to play as a regular."

"T-That would be bad! Ken-kun really wanted that spot, and if I remember correctly, our class points might be affected by a student's suspension or expulsion, right?" said Airi.

When I nodded in response, Akito tapped my shoulder.

"Wait a minute, Kiyotaka. As much as how amazing your deduction sounds, aren't you just being a bit paranoid? I don't know about Komiya and Kondou, but Ishizaki's an idiot. I doubt they could come up with such a convoluted and well-prepared plan just to mess with Ken," he said.

"That's what's even more dangerous."

"What do you mean...?" Akito narrowed his eyes.

"I told you before, right? Class D is attacking us, not just those three... In other words, they're under someone's orders, and that someone leads the whole class."

At that moment, Akito gave us a vexed sigh.

"Ryuuen, huh?" he said.

"Ryuuen?" asked Haruka.

The two girls became confused upon hearing an unfamiliar name.

"So you know him, too?" I asked.

"Well, his middle school was right next to mine. He's the leader there. Like Ishizaki, that guy is trouble, as well-- just a lot worse."

"E-Eh..." Haruka was creeped out with his words.

"I already had a bad premonition when I saw his face at the entrance ceremony..." Akito furrowed his brows. "So he chose to cause trouble in high school too, huh?"

"I get that you knew him from back then, Miyacchi, but how about you, Kiyopon? How'd you find out that this Ryuuen is the leader of Class D?"

"Kikyou told me about it. She said that one of her friends from



Class D talked about Ryuuken ruling their class," I explained.

"Kikyou?" Haruka and Airi muttered at the same time.

"So the reason why they left, even if Ken was grilling them verbally, was because their boss told them not to do anything reckless. Damn... I guess what you're saying makes sense now, Kiyotaka... But I still find it hard to believe."

"Don't worry, I'm the same. Frankly, we have no concrete evidence to back up this claim apart from a few clues here and there. And it wouldn't make too much sense for Class D to attack us when Class C is the more obvious target," I said.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking." As Akito nodded in agreement, I grabbed my phone inside my pocket.

"That's why I'll try to confirm if we're really the *only* class that's getting targeted," I said.

"Eh?"

When I found her number, I immediately pressed the call button. The other end picked up quickly. I put the call on speaker.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Ah, Ichinose, sorry for the sudden call."

The three watched in silence, with surprise and confusion all over their faces.

*"Oh, it's fine. I'm just hanging out with a bunch of my female classmates in Mako-chan's room."*

Since I couldn't hear anyone, she must've excused herself to receive the call.

"I see, then I'll make this quick. Did anybody from Class D cause trouble for you guys?"

*"Eh-? Where did that come from?"*

"Well, I noticed that you guys suffered quite a bit in June, so I thought something might've happened. And now, I just found out that some Class D boys almost tried to fight with my friend," I explained. "I was curious on whether they're causing trouble for you, too."

*"A fight? It seems like you guys have to deal with your own problems too, huh? You're right though. We lost 77 class points last month, after all,"* she sighed. *"I won't go into the specifics, but what they did almost split the class. Thankfully, a lot of my classmates worked together with me to bring everyone back together. To be honest, I think I should be thankful for that 'trouble'. Our class is has become more united than it has ever been!"*

"I see, thanks for telling me. If there's any trouble I can help you with, feel free to give me or Kikyou a call. Goodbye, Ichinose."

*"Okay~! I'll be counting on you, Ayanokouji-kun. Bye!"* I proceeded to press the end-call button.



That confirms our suspicions then.

"It seems like we weren't the only class that was targeted."

"T-That was Ichinose Honami-san from Class C, right?" asked Airi.

I wonder how Class D moved against Class A, or if they even did something with Class A at all? It's too bad that I don't have any deep connections with anyone there.

"You know her, Airi?"

"Everyone in our year knows her, Kiyopon! She's, like, the most popular first-year girl!"

"I'd argue that Kushida-san from our class is the same, but Ichinose has a different type of charisma," added Akito.

Oh... So that's their impression on Ichinose, huh?

"You're close with her, Kiyotaka-kun?" asked Airi.

"I wouldn't say 'close', but I guess you can call us friends. Some coincidences led to it," I replied.

"Wait, wait. Ichinose-san aside, you sound like you've anticipated this from the start, Kiyotaka." Akito was more interested in the contents of our call.

"Eh? You mean how Kiyopon mentioned their class points in June, right?"

"Yeah, I did," I answered. "When I saw their class points drop like that in June, I figured that Class D must've begun to move. I wasn't sure until now, though. It seems like we're on Class D's radar too. Of course, that's only if my theories about Ken's conflict were all true."

When everything came to light, Haruka and Akito just shook their head in submission.

"You never fail to amaze me, Kiyotaka..." Akito said.

"Kiyopon's smarts are on a different level..."

"Thanks for the compliment, but wasn't Airi the real MVP here?" I said.

"E-Eh?" Airi slightly flinched in surprise.

"Oh, that's right. If it weren't for Airi, Ken might've been in big trouble right now." Akito smiled at her.

Haruka snuggled close to her before asking the most vital question in this situation.

"But Kiyopon, wouldn't they just change targets then?"

"You're right... That's exactly what worries me..."

"Yeah... Kiyotaka's amazing, but in the end, he's still just one person. Ken almost got in trouble under our watch," Akito said before looking at me. "Of course, I'm not saying that it's your responsibility if Ken got in trouble."

No, it should be my responsibility. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that I let my guard down.

Setting the negatives aside, however... Really, who would've



thought? I intended to make Ken and Airi interact because their flaws complement each other... A wild boy and a timid girl-- I got curious about how their natures would blend.

But, if they didn't become friends, our situation right now would've been completely different.

"Well, there's no point in staying around in this place anymore. We got what we need," I said.

And with that, our group left the building.

Finally, I was in my room. I felt my phone vibrate from the inside of my pocket.

*(16:12) [Kiyopon, are you free right now?]*

It was Haruka. I had one last plan with Horikita, but that's a bit later, around eight in the evening. Since it wasn't even six, I guess I can say I'm free.

*(16:12) [Yeah.]*

*(16:12) [What's up?]*

*(16:12) [Can I come to your room?]*

*(16:12) [Sure, but why?]*

*(16:12) [Ah...]*

*(16:13) [I just wanted to hang out, I guess! ♡(@°▽°@)♪]*

*(16:13) [I see.]*

*(16:13) [I'll be waiting then.]*

After a good ten minutes or so, I heard a knock on my door.

"Yo! Kiyopon!"

Her energy wasn't drained in the least.

She was wearing new clothes, something that was more casual than what she wore earlier. A white t-shirt under her red jersey jacket with a light-green silk skirt... It suddenly dawned on me that Haruka was the type of girl who looked very attractive no matter the type of clothes she wore.

"I have a few chips stocked in here. Wanna watch a movie or something?" I asked.

"W-Woah! You're quite the hospitable host when there's only one guest, huh? That's surprising..."

"What? I thought you wanted to hang out?" Of course, her comment left me confused.

"Ah-- Hahaha... Well, the thing that was on my mind was just talking and stuff," she said.

"Oh... I see. That's alright. What did you want to talk about?"

As I was saying that, Haruka made herself comfortable and lay on my bed. Don't roll around like that when you're wearing a skirt.

"Wanna lay down beside me~?" she asked, patting the unoccupied area of the bed.



"Stop teasing me, it won't work," I shrugged, before sitting down on a chair.

"Ehhh? Well, I guess that's something Kiyopon would say~."

"So? Why'd decide to drop by?"

"Hmm... I think I just wanted to talk?" So she wasn't even sure...

I guess shaking my head was an appropriate reaction, so I did. With a curious expression, Haruka sat up and faced me in response.

"Kiyopon... You're not normal, are you?"



## Vol. 2: Chapter 3.4 - Blank Slate

"A-Ah-! What I meant was... You're completely different from normal people like me... or Miyacchi, for example," she clarified.

"What do you mean by different?" I tilted my head.

"Well, you're really smart and athletic. You're super strong, too."

"Ohh... I mean, Hirata's the same, right? Kouenji, too. And I'm sure there are some students in other classes who are like me. Not to mention the higher years," I mused.

"You're right... You're right but, there's just something about you that..." Haruka can't seem to articulate her thoughts. "It's like you're... more mysterious than anyone else-- like you're still holding back..."

Is that something noticeable? It must be my demeanor if anything else.

"I see... I think you're just talking about my negative traits, Haruka. For example, I don't like talking about myself and I'm not that great at making casual conversations, so I might give the impression of aloofness and mystery. I also don't look motivated when doing anything, so it feels like I'm still holding back... And because I'm your friend, you might just be romanticizing those negative traits into something positive, which is understandable," I explained.

I ruthlessly rationalized Haruka's romanticism.

This might be what Chabashira-sensei was saying. My excuse right now was pretty reasonable, but it would only work on the people I'm close with, like Haruka.

"That's... You might be right... You're probably right... But somehow, I just get this feeling that--... It's like you're... *unfathomable*," she said, with a serious expression. "I'm sure Miyacchi, Airi, Kencchin, and everyone in Class B have already sensed it. Sure, there are a lot of exceptional students in this school, but you give off a different kind of '*exceptional*' vibe."

"Is that so...? Well, I can't understand it myself. My perspective is distinctly different from everyone else's, after all."

"It's pretty weird though. You were popular in your younger years, right? Especially since you're a foreigner in America," she said.

I knew it would come to this...



"No... I didn't really have any friends."

"Eh?! Like, zero? I thought you were just exaggerating!"

I nod.

"Were you not showing your abilities back then like you're doing now, or something?"

"I guess so. I didn't really take school too seriously, so everyone left me alone. I had a pretty peaceful school life."

"You're a weirdo. You would've been extremely popular!" She comedically reprimanded me.

"Well, I didn't really know how to talk with people back then," I explained. "I just forced myself to socialize with others in this school. Even if I liked solitude, I can't possibly ascend to the higher classes without associating myself with you guys."

"Ohh... I see... That makes sense..."

It was better to say that I really had no friends back then. It would make the conversation more manageable. In the end, I had no choice but to be vague. However, my explanations should satisfy Haruka's curiosity.

"Why'd you wanna talk about all this?" I asked.

"Ah- Eh... That's... I just wanted to know you more, I guess." Haruka scratched her head. "Hahaha..."

That's fair. I already know so much about her, after all. That goes for most of my friends, like Matsushita or Karuizawa. Meanwhile, I haven't really talked about myself that much-- for obvious reasons, of course.

I stared at her in silence. Because of this, Haruka panicked and tried to change the topic.

"By the way, Kiyopon!" she said. "You call Kushida-san by her first name now, huh? When did that start?"

"Ah, if I remember correctly, we agreed to call each other by our first names on Friday."

"I see, hahaha, I guess that's understandable. She's your best friend, after all!" Haruka said with a grin.

"I don't know if you can call us best friends, though. We're not even in the same friend group, right? But you can probably call her the closest girl to me," I said.

I thought it'd help Kikyou if I reinforced her claim. But then again, it's not like Haruka can spread my words to the other girls in the class apart from Airi.

"The closest... girl..." Haruka muttered. "I see! Well, isn't that great?"

The Haruka I know would probably bite back with something like; *"Ohoho. You actually have the gall to say that I'm not the closest girl to you? Aren't you getting full of yourself, Kiyopon?"*. But then



again, this is one of the rare times where Haruka and I get to be alone together. Maybe she acts a bit differently when we're with the rest of the group.

"Well, enough about me. How about you? Did you have a lot of friends in middle school?"

Haruka blinked like a spell that was binding her suddenly got lifted.

"Oh! Fufun~, of course, I did. To be honest, I would've done the same here, but I don't really feel like getting close with some of the girls in our class," she laughed bitterly. "I love Airi, though!"

"I see." I get that Haruka wasn't fond of Karuizawa and her friends, but I wonder why she didn't want to be closer with Kikyuu. Well, the two of them seem very friendly with each other in class, so I guess it's fine.

"Uhm, Kiyopon." Before I could ask my next question, Haruka suddenly faced me with a very serious expression.

"Yeah?"

"This would've been more fun if the rest of our friends are here, but I really wanted to ask you now," she said. "Do you... have a crush on anyone?"

"Hmm... No, I don't think so. We've talked about this before, right?"

"Well... You've got girls like Kushida-san who are very close to you, and it seems like you're good friends with Ichinose-san from Class C, too. I was sure that you'd at least come to like one of them," she explained. "I thought you were just too shy to say anything back then, so I didn't really believe you."

"I do find a lot of girls attractive, but I don't think I'm fit to be in a relationship just yet. And it's not like any of them would be interested in me," I said.

"Do you seriously think that? I'll punch you." Haruka glared at me while raising a closed fist.

"I get that my athleticism and academic abilities can attract people, but once they get to know me, they'd probably get bored."

*That's right... Once the mystery is over, the show ends. What they'll get is an unexciting, dry slate of a guy. Some might get close enough to discover the wall between me and my inner self, but whether they can bust through that wall is another matter.*

*I sincerely hope that I can connect with someone deeply and truthfully... Maybe... Someday...*

"Why... would you say something like that about yourself?"

"Don't worry, I'm not saying this to earn any sort of pity from others. I'm not upset or sad about it. My dull personality is just something that I'm aware of. If I were as good as Hirata or Ike in



making conversations, then I'd probably feel more confident with myself in that regard," I said. "But it's not like I'm not satisfied with who I am now. I'm quite happy with my current self. And besides, I made good friends like you guys."

Those words were meant to ground me. I wanted to appear normal and relatable-- someone who has his own worries and troubles. That said, they were also very true.

"So you're saying that you're just a normal guy, like Kenchin and Miyacchi?"

"Probably. I'm not really any different from anyone-- at least I don't think so," I shrugged. "Ken would beat me in any ball sport, and I aspire to have Akito's demeanor. And those two's street knowledge is something I want to learn, as well. In the end, some people are just better at different things."

Hearing my words, Haruka smiled just widened.

"I see, I've learned a lot about you today, Kiyonon," she said as she stood from my bed.

"You're going?"

"Yep~!"

"That's not fair, though. I didn't learn anything about you," I said.

"There's always next time, Kiyonon~! We'll be together for a very long time, after all." Haruka ran to the door. "Bye!"

"Good... bye?" I didn't even get to respond.

What was that, all of a sudden?

After sitting on my bed, I took the time to reflect on myself.

What am I, even?

Personally, I never thought of myself as someone who's "interesting". If I was open about my past, and if I acted true to what my inner thoughts were thinking, then I'd just scare everyone away. So I discarded all of that and decided to hide them. But what's left of me, then? Am I not just a capable yet boring guy with a monotone way of speaking?

I'm able to create a completely new personality for myself, but everyone would just find it weird at this point. I've already made up my mind to stick with my real "personality" if I can even call it one.

That man and that room stripped away my humanity. I don't even know if I'm capable of smiling or laughing genuinely. Cold? Calculating? Cunning? I never asked for any of that. I never asked to *be* any of that. But I'm also aware that someone who's the complete opposite of me might be wishing for the things that I have.

It's just the nature of humans, I guess. You would always crave the things you don't possess.



## SS.6 - Hasebe Haruka: Ideal

"A-Ah-! What I meant was... You're completely different from normal people like me... or Miyacchi, for example."

"What do you mean by different?" Kiyopon tilted his head.

"Well, you're really smart and athletic. You're super strong, too." Somehow, complimenting him like this feels a bit embarrassing.

"Ohh... I mean, Hirata's the same, right? Kouenji, too. And I'm sure there are some students in other classes who are like me. Not to mention the higher years."

That's not what I'm talking about... Well, it is, but-

"You're right... You're right but, there's just something about you that..." I can't seem to articulate my thoughts. "It's like you're... more mysterious than anyone else-- like you're still holding back..."

Ahh, dang it... Why can't I properly say what I want to say?!

"I see... I think you're just talking about my negative traits, Haruka. For example, I don't like talking about myself and I'm not that great at making casual conversations, so I might give the impression of aloofness and mystery. I also don't look motivated when doing anything, so it feels like I'm still holding back... And because I'm your friend, you might just be romanticizing those negative traits into something positive, which is understandable."

There he goes again... Explaining everything so soundly using reason and logic.

"That's... You might be right... You're probably right... But somehow, I just get this feeling that--... It's like you're... *unfathomable*," I said. "I'm sure Miyacchi, Airi, Kencchin, and everyone in Class B have already sensed it. Sure, there are a lot of exceptional students in this school, but you give off a different kind of *'exceptional'* vibe."

"Is that so...? Well, I can't understand it myself. My perspective is distinctly different from everyone else's, after all."

There's no way Kiyopon can understand how other people see him. That's why I *want* to make him understand, but I just can't seem to do it...

"It's pretty weird though. You were popular in your younger years, right? Especially since you're a foreigner in America."

"No... I didn't really have any friends."



"Eh?! Like, zero? I thought you were just exaggerating!"

He nodded. So he really *was* a loner?

"Were you not showing your abilities back then like you're doing now, or something?"

"I guess so. I didn't really take school too seriously, so everyone left me alone. I had a pretty peaceful school life."

"You're a weirdo. You would've been extremely popular!" I reprimanded him.

"Well, I didn't really know how to talk with people back then," he explained. "I just forced myself to socialize with others in this school. Even if I liked solitude, I can't possibly ascend to the higher classes without associating myself with you guys."

This school encouraged competitions between classes, and the results were directly tied to our futures. I see. I think I can understand him a bit more now. Still, it's just a waste to hide your abilities when you have them. But knowing Kiyopon, I guess he just didn't want to stand out.

"Ohh... I see... That makes sense..."

"Why'd you wanna talk about all this?" he asked.

"Ah-- Eh... That's... I just wanted to know you more, I guess." I scratched my head while trying to make an excuse. "Hahaha..."

He stared in silence which makes me panic even more! I quickly tried to change the topic.

"By the way, Kiyopon!" I called. "You call Kushida-san by her first name now, huh? When did that start?"

Crap, why did I ask *that* of all questions? My inner feelings are leaking out.

"Ah, if I remember correctly, we agreed to call each other by our first names on Friday."

"I see, hahaha, I guess that's understandable. She's your best friend, after all!" I said with a grin.

"I don't know if you can call us best friends, though. We're not even in the same friend group, right? But you can probably call her the closest girl to me," he replied.

The closest... girl... Lucky her...

"The closest... girl..." I muttered. "I see! Well, isn't that great?"

T-That was bad... I almost thought out loud.

"Well, enough about me. How about you? Did you have a lot of friends in middle school?"

Ah, he's right. I've been interrogating him for too long.

"Oh! Fufun~, of course, I did. To be honest, I would've done the same here, but I don't really feel like getting close with some of the girls in our class," I laughed bitterly. "I love Airi, though!"

I don't want to associate myself with the likes of Karuizawa-san



or her friends. I honestly don't think we can get along... I'm good friends with Kushida-san's group, but in the end, I still feel like an outsider.

"I see."

Arrghh! You know what, I'll just ask him outright! It won't be the death of me even if things go wrong.

"Uhm, Kiyopon..."

Kiyopon looked like he was about to ask me more things, but my curiosity can't help it anymore.

"Yeah?"

"This would've been more fun if the rest of our friends are here, but I really wanted to ask you now... Do you... have a crush on anyone?"

I asked it! Will Kiyopon think that I have some sort of motive behind it?

"Hmm... No, I don't think so. We've talked about this before, right?" Of course, he just answers me directly...

"Well... You've got girls like Kushida-san who are very close to you, and it seems like you're good friends with Ichinose-san from Class C, too. I was sure that you'd at least come to like one of them," I explained. "I thought you were just too shy to say anything back then, so I didn't really believe you."

They were all cute girls. Boys were crazy about them. It wouldn't be weird if it turns out that Kiyopon has a crush on any of them.

"I do find a lot of girls attractive, but I don't think I'm fit to be in a relationship just yet. And it's not like any of them would be interested in me," he replied.

What? I understand the relationship part, but his last sentence was just a bit too ridiculous and ignorant.

"Do you seriously think that? I'll punch you." I glared at him while raising a closed fist.

"I get that my athleticism and academic abilities can attract people, but once they get to know me, they'd probably get bored."

Kiyopon has been very vocal about his lack of conversational skills and dull tone. I've thought about this for a while now, but I don't think he's insecure about his personality flaws. He goes as far as to call himself boring, but it's not like he's bitter about it...

Still though... That's not true, Kiyopon... I don't think you're boring at all...

"Why... would you say something like that about yourself?"

His words inadvertently made me sad.

"Don't worry, I'm not saying this to earn any sort of pity from others. I'm not upset or sad about it. My dull personality is just something that I'm aware of. If I were as good as Hirata or Ike in



making conversations, then I'd probably feel more confident with myself in that regard," he said. "But it's not like I'm not satisfied with who I am now. I'm quite happy with my current self. And besides, I made good friends like you guys."

He wasn't insecure about anything. As usual, Kiyopon was thinking about himself in a very logical way. That might also be the reason why I felt like he can act cold sometimes.

"So you're saying that you're just a normal guy, like Kenchin and Miyacchi?"

"Probably. I'm not really any different from anyone-- at least I don't think so," he shrugged. "Ken would beat me in any ball sport, and I aspire to have Akito's demeanor. And those two's street knowledge is something I want to learn, as well. In the end, some people are just better at different things."

After hearing his words, I've finally made up my mind.

"I see, I've learned a lot about you today, Kiyopon," I stood up and straightened my clothes.

"You're going?"

"Yep~!"

"That's not fair, though. I didn't learn anything about you," he protested.

"There's always next time, Kiyopon~! We'll be together for a very long time, after all."

I-I can't believe I just said something so embarrassing... I reflexively made a run for it.

"Bye!"

I exited Kiyopon's room with quickened breaths.

My mind stayed blank until I got back to my room...

"Hah... What am I even doing?" I muttered. "I tried to look cute in front of him, but I wonder if it even had an effect at all...?"

I sighed once more.

Until now, I've never gotten into a relationship. But I would be lying if I said that I've never liked anyone.

When I was in elementary school I had one, in middle school I also had one. They were both senpais, two years older than me. Unfortunately, I've never talked to any of them. They were intelligent, handsome, good at sports-- those types of all-rounded senpai.

More than liking, using the word "*longing*" in order to express my feelings would be more fitting. I tried to start a conversation with them countless times, but I never had enough courage to actually pull through.

That was a past where I couldn't even confirm whether it was



love or not. The next time I harbor these kinds of feelings, I don't want to regret it again. I had been thinking like this all the way until now.

In short, the threshold for me to fall in love was a bit high, or maybe I wasn't interested in ordinary boys. As a living creature, this should be very normal. In brief, my ideal standards were extremely high.

But I don't get *him*... I don't get Ayanokouji Kiyotaka at all. I know he explained everything to me, and I know I should get what he's saying, but *that* feeling didn't go away. I still felt like something was hidden beneath his calm and cool expression.

I was interested in him. I want to know more about him. I want to spend more time with him. He was my ideal... No, he exceeds my ideal.

Unlike the longing I felt for my two senpais in the past, I can confidently say that I *like* him.

*I like Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.*

This feeling... I won't let it go to waste-- not anymore. I've regretted my past decisions twice, so I won't make the same mistake again.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 4.1 - Katabasis

The mornings in Class B were lively. Everything seemed normal to everyone, and as far as they're concerned, the only thing that they needed to worry about was the upcoming final exam. After that, all of us will enjoy an extravagant summer vacation on an island paradise. Or at least, that's what Chabashira-sensei told us before.

After another normal day had passed, I decided to make my move. As usual, it's convenient that Chabashira-sensei has the tendency to leave earlier once everything is settled in the afternoon homeroom.

"Alright, that's all. Goodbye."

"Chabashira-sensei, I have something that I would like to announce. Is it alright if you stay a little longer?" I stood up and walked to the front.

"Ayanokouji? Hmm. Alright, make it quick," she answered.

Hirata and Kikyou were surprised, just like the rest of the class. They sat straight, waiting for me to say my piece. Horikita was the only one waiting for my signal. After all, I explained everything to her during our meeting. At the same time, Akito, Sakura, and Haruka also seemed to guess what's going to happen. I called them up to vouch for my words in Horikita's presence last night.

"Firstly, I would like to confirm something. Do all of you recognize me as Class B's leader?" I asked.

Well, before I make the announcement of stepping down, I should at least confirm if most of them even think of me as the leader. It would be pretentious to suddenly get to it without considering the others' opinions.

"Yes, Ayanokouji-kun. I think there's no other person in this room that's fit to lead the class more than you do," said Hirata.

"Yeah! You're the one who brought us this far, Kiyotaka-kun!" followed Kikyou.

"I know right? Like, you're the smartest guy in school. Of course, you're our leader." Karuizawa shrugged as if she just said something obvious.

"That's right!"

"I know you'll lead us to Class A, Ayanokouji!"

Eventually, almost all of my classmates parroted their words.



"I see. Then, I have a proposal. I've talked about this with Hirata, Horikita, and Kikyou, but I didn't tell them that I'd announce it today." I turned to look at each of them. "If possible, I'd like your help in explaining."

Chabashira-sensei didn't seem to know where I was getting at. She continued listening to my words in silence.

Hirata and the two girls stood up and proceeded to the front.

"I was surprised at first, but now I understand," started Hirata. "To put everything simply, Ayanokouji-kun will be stepping down as the class's leader."

Everyone's shocked reactions instantly became apparent.

"What?"

"What does that mean?"

"Why is Ayanokouji-kun stepping down?"

Some had concerned and anxious expressions. Of course, their confusion was understandable.

"Everyone, please let us explain." Kikyou got their attention with ease. "I can't break down the exact details, but one thing is clear: This is part of Kiyotaka-kun's plan so we can rise to Class A."

Muffled murmurs followed Kikyou's words.

"Kushida-san, allow me to elaborate." Horikita stepped in to help.

"Ah, yes. Please do, Horikita-san," replied Kikyou.

"Everyone, I don't think any of us have noticed it yet, but one class has started to move." Horikita turned to Sudou. "Sudou-kun, you almost got into a fight with three boys from Class D, am I right?"

"What the?" Ken was confused about how that came to light, but he calmed down when he realized that no one was reprimanding him or any of the sort. "Yeah... Komiya and Kondou called me to the special building. I went with them and saw a guy named Ishizaki, waiting. That bastard Komiya punched me, but I dodged. It would've been a full-blown fight, but my friend, Airi, called out to me. Everything ended there since they just left after that, for some reason."

Our classmates listened intently. Their attention was divided between Ken and Airi. Of course, this made Airi a little jittery.

"Thank you for giving us some context." Horikita shifted everyone's attention back to herself. "Now then, most of you might think that the fight was something normal or natural given Sudou-kun's nature, but according to Ayanokouji-kun, something else was going on."

Apart from my friends, everyone was nervous and confused, including Kikyou and Hirata.

"It was an attack by Class D," she continued.



"An attack?"

"How does that even work?"

"Huh?"

"What the heck?"

Of course, you wouldn't normally use the word "*attack*" in the context of a competition between two high school classes.

"We'll just give everyone a detailed explanation in the group chat later on. I've already made a document containing Ayanokouji-kun's investigation. His friends; Hasebe-san, Miyake-kun, and Sakura-san, were all with him during this investigation. They all vouched for him and his words," she said.

"Hmph."

At that moment, Kouenji stood up haughtily and left the room. Of course, most of us didn't mind him, even Chabashira-sensei.

"There's another piece of evidence that might help with Ayanokouji-kun's claim. According to Ichinose-san of Class C, they've also been '*attacked*' by Class D. I'm sure some of you have noticed how big the decrease on their class points was in June."

Her words caused another uproar.

"E-Even Class C?"

"Is Class D getting desperate?"

"I'll end my piece here since we don't have much time," Horikita said as she looked at me.

Once again, I stood before everyone.

"We still don't know who the mastermind is, that's why I plan to investigate further. I would like to appoint Horikita as the temporary leader of Class B," I said.

Of course, my sudden proclamation garnered some mixed reactions. Even the person in question was confused.

"Ayanokouji-kun... I didn't hear about this," she said.

"I'm sure most of us can agree on how capable Horikita is. With Hirata and Kikyou acting as her supports, they can easily lead Class B forward. While I'm scouting out the potential dangers to our class, I'll still try my best in helping the three of them from a more passive position," I explained. "I'll return to the position once I make sure everything's in order."

"I'm not against the idea." Hirata accepted it with a smile.

"I'm the same." I don't know how Kikyou really felt, but she happily followed Hirata's undertaking.

"I'm not sure if I got it right, but are saying that you're going to hide for a while?" Ike asked.

"That's basically the gist of it," I answered.

"So you're still, like, our leader... But from the shadows?" Satou mused.



"Probably...?"

"T-That so cool!"

"Doesn't that mean... Ayanokouji-kun will be like a secret weapon?"

"Or like a trump card!"

I expected more opposing opinions. I thought some of them might interpret it differently-- like how I might be using Horikita and the others as a scapegoat, but it seems like that wasn't the case. My reputation and credibility were a lot firmer than I expected.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can I explain my personal take on this plan?" Hirata approached the center.

"Sure. I'm just about done, anyway."

"Everyone, I want to make things clear. This plan was made because Ayanokouji-kun predicted that classes would start going after each other this way once the concept of class points get revealed. And with our quick rise to Class B, it's inevitable for the attention of other classes to be on us," he started.

"Wait, wait, wait. So you're saying that Ayanokouji anticipated this even before May?"

"Wow..."

"How is that even..."

Hirata continued despite the clamor.

"When the four of us talked about this, I didn't know why Ayanokouji-kun created this plan. But the more I listened to him, the more I was convinced." Hirata put his hands on the podium, cementing his demand for everyone's attention to his next words. "Ayanokouji-kun's goal is to protect everyone."

"Hirata... You didn't need to say that much..." I said.

I didn't even know the expression I made. Seriously, he's such a good guy.

"Ahaha, I'm sorry if I made you feel a little embarrassed, Ayanokouji-kun. However, I think everyone needs to know that your intentions are not just for your class's sake, but also for your classmates' sake," he said, before facing everyone with a serious expression.

"Class C's points suffered quite a bit. And as you've already heard, Sudou-kun just got targeted by Class D. We'll do our best to act as decoys so Ayanokouji-kun can intercept any schemes more effectively," explained Hirata. "And lastly, I'd like to advise everyone... Please be careful."

Our classmates were used to Hirata's princely demeanor, so everyone was on edge during the entirety of his stalwart speech.

At that moment, the dismissal bell finally rang.

"Horikita, send your regards to the class," I whispered.



"Do I really need to?" Horikita whispered back.

"Yeah, I'll be frank, apart from the great results of your tutees from the midterms, you haven't really shown anything to gain the class's trust. It's the best move to make if you want them to know that you're on their side."

With an exasperated sigh, Horikita moved forward after Hirata finished speaking. She glared at me before turning her face back towards everyone.

"Everyone, as per Ayanokouji-kun's instruction, I'll be looking forward to working with you. Please take care of me."

What a serious girl. If the entire class didn't already know her personality, they would probably brush her words off as insincere.

"Let's do our best, Horikita-san," cheered Kikyou.

"Horikita-san is super smart too, right? I think she'll be a neat leader," said Karuizawa.

"Woohoo! Go Horikita-chan!" yelled Ike.

I looked at Chabashira-sensei, indicating that the show is over.

"Hoh? It seems like the class has been functioning well for the last three months. It's great to see how unified the class is under the most capable students' leadership. You're almost as tight as Class C in terms of unity." Chabashira-sensei praised the class, to everyone's surprise.

Leaving us with those parting remarks, Chabashira-sensei exited the room.

Everything went back to normal, and Akito, who was seating ahead, turned to face me.

"Kiyotaka-"

"Sorry, Akito. I'll head out for a bit. I have some questions for Chabashira-sensei." I stood up, leaving my bag behind.

The entire class watched me hasten my pace before finally disappearing from sight.

I trailed Chabashira-sensei from a certain distance. The moment we reached a hallway with little to no students, I approached her.

"Sensei."

"Oh, Ayanokouji? You did something amusing back there, but I don't get why I needed to hear it. Well, I have some ideas, but nothing is clear to me."

She instantly got to the point.

"I'm not asking for anything that's beyond a teacher's abilities, but if possible, I'd like your help in lowering my chances of standing out," I said. "That's the reason why I wanted you to hear my so-called plan; to give you some context."

"Hmm... Interesting. Alright, since it's you, I'll do what I can," Chabashira-sensei answered with a smirk.



"I see, thank you," I bowed lightly.

This plan won't last long. Once my enemies start to investigate our class, they'll eventually find out about my athletic abilities through the swimming records. And of course, my academic abilities will come to light once they look over the results for the midterm exams and final exams. However, I don't think it will matter too much. After all, I just need to buy some time.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 4.2 - The New Targets

"Ken, how'd your practice go yesterday? You finally met with Komiya and Kondou again, right?" asked Akito.

The Ayanokouji Group was having lunch in the cafeteria, as usual. Wednesday noons are just as effervescent as the two preceding days. Everyone around us vigorously chatted with their friends while eating.

"Heh, all they could do was glare at me. Those two won't be able to beat me in a fight anyway, even if that Ishizaki guy backs them up," Ken scoffed with confidence.

"Just don't fall for their provocations again. Things would've been bad if Airi didn't call out to you," I said.

"Yeah," Ken said before turning to Airi, who was beside him. "Thanks for that, Airi."

"I-It's fine, Ken-kun. I didn't think that my actions would have such an impact, anyway. I just panicked when I saw one of them punch you," replied Airi.

"But still, I owe you one," Ken smiled with a thumbs-up.

"How about not getting into fights in the first place, idiot Kencchin?" Haruka snickered.

"B-But what if they pick on me first? Of course, I'll strike back if they start the fight!" Ken tried to justify his hypothetical course of action.

Haruka looked at him like he was scolding a child.

"You know, Kencchin, you'd be so much cooler if you were as calm as Miyacchi or Kiyopon," she said.

"Wha-?!"

Haruka teased Ken a bit more before we went back to the classroom.

"Is this it, Haruki?! Is our moment finally coming?" Ike asked Yamauchi with overwhelming excitement."

"Yeah, Kanji! This is our time!" Yamauchi responded with the same vigor.

They were hanging out with Miyamoto, Professor, and Hondou.

"Are you really sure, Kanji? They might just be baiting you." Miyamoto asked with a skeptical expression.

"Hahaha, I wouldn't imagine Haruki, of all people, getting a message like that." Hondou chuckled haughtily.



"Shut up, you two! You're just jealous!" Yamauchi snapped angrily.

"Hmph. Don't lump us in the same group just because no one's interested in you two," added Ike.

"But gentlemen, as much as I'm couldn't care less about your 3D-Girl business, didn't Hirata-dono and Ayanokouji-dono warn us? According to my Neo-Akashic records, Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san are both from Class D," Professor stated using his strange way of speaking.

"Yeah, the timing is too convenient. Isn't Class D's plan obvious at this point?" Hondou shrugged.

"The hell?! There's no way. How dare you think ill of someone's feelings just because they're from another class?" rebutted Ike. "And I'm sure their timing is just a coincidence. I would reconsider it if the two of them are close friends, but they're not even in the same friend group."

"Yeah! And besides, they only told us to be careful. It's not like we weren't allowed to interact with them, right? It'll be fine if we just keep our guard up." Yamauchi snorted as if he just sealed the deal on a debate.

Someone who thought up that plan regarding Ken shouldn't be this impatient. Is it desperation, after all? Was I overestimating him? Is that the kind of person Ryuen Kakeru is? He's not even being subtle at this point. It's like he's sending us a message.

Airi's interruption to his plan should've been accidental. He wouldn't think that someone is going up against him. He must be testing us.

I approached the five of them while waving my hand lightly.

"Hey, I heard you two talking about some girls," I said.

"Oh, Ayanokouji. These two idiots are getting all worked up just because some Class D girls started chatting them up," said Miyamoto.

"Yeah, it's obviously just Class D switching targets. These two are easy, after all." Hondou raised an eyebrow.

"What? You're here to talk smack about us too, Ayanokouji?" Ike wore a displeased expression.

"Yeah, we still haven't forgiven your betrayal last Saturday! You don't plan to get in our way now too, do you?" said Yamauchi.

I remember the commotion last Thursday morning, before class. It was right before Chabashira-sensei announced our points for July. Kikyou instantly greeted me as soon as she arrived in the classroom. That much was normal for everyone. However, since Kikyou started calling me by my given name, most of the boys were instantly irked, especially Ike and Yamauchi. They only shut up their mouths



after Kikyō told them that it was her idea.

Well, the fact that they instantly shifted their attention to other girls the moment they get noticed by them was amazing, to say the least.

"Nah, I was just curious. Miyamoto, Hondou, Professor, I don't think it's nice to berate Ike and Yamauchi just because they're getting close with the girls from Class D. In fact, it could even work in our favor," I said.

"Huh? In our favor? What do you mean, Ayanokouji?" asked the confused Yamauchi.

"Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san, right? Once the two of you start going out with them, you can start extracting some information. Of course, I'm not saying that you two should go out with them solely for that reason. No need to share anything personal. Just be sure to tell me or Hirata anything that you think would be helpful to the class. "

"Oh! That did not even cross my mind, Ayanokouji-dono. It seems like we have been focusing too much on the danger, wouldn't you say?" said Professor.

"Well... I guess that could work?" Miyamoto and Hondou were still skeptical.

"G-Go out with them?"

"That would be nice..."

The two of them were on cloud nine while thinking about that outcome.

"Yeah, Yamauchi is right. You can mingle with them all you want as long as you're being careful."

"Heh! Hear that, you three? Even Ayanokouji supports us!" Yamauchi faced them with a smug smirk.

"Dude, they just started chatting with you last Sunday. They might lose interest after a week or so," said Miyamoto.

"We kept them interested for such a long time. That's a good sign!" Ike protested.

"Well, whatever your progress is, I'm looking forward to it, Ike, Yamauchi. You're smart enough to avoid trouble, right?" I said.

"Of course, leave it to us." Ike patted his chest.

"Yeah!" Yamauchi followed with a thumbs-up.

Well, these two might be easy targets for Class D, but that would also make them a flexible asset for me. They're not really significant to the class at the moment, so I can always just choose to abandon them if necessary. I also don't have to be careful about offending them because of my position in the class hierarchy. To be honest, I don't mind burning a few hundred points if I can get rid of the setbacks.



That night, Kikyou visited my room. After venting her frustrations, she seemed exhausted as usual.

"Sigh... Why can't some people just die or something...?" Kikyou whispered with a tired expression.

Like most times, Kikyou leaned on my shoulders while I patted her head, which was a bit strange given the content of her words. She also started to not mind my actions after a while.

"You need to stop spoiling me like this, Kiyotaka-kun. I'll start getting dependent," she said.

"I thought doing this puts you at ease."

"It does, that's why it's pretty addicting."

"Oh... That would be bad, I guess." I tried to lift my hand off of her hair but...

"Keep patting me," she demanded. Her tone was scary so I just complied.

"Okay..."

After Kikyou was satisfied, she sat straight before facing me.

"Alright, I'm fine now!" I will never stop being impressed by how she switches her personality with such finesse.

"Kikyou, can I ask you about some girls from Class D?"

"Oh? If my guess is correct, it would be Manabe-san and Kinoshita-san, right?" she smiled.

"Ah... As expected of you, huh?"

"I'm friends with Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun too, you know?" Kikyou's expression suddenly turned grim. "They're trying to show them off those girls to me more so than they're doing to their male friends, probably with the goal of making me jealous or something. It's honestly so pathetic and gross."

So they haven't given up on Kikyou yet? They're trying to gauge her reactions and decide from there? I don't know if that's their mindset, but at the very least, Kikyou didn't seem happy about it.

"It's so obvious that they're the one getting targeted by Class D this time around. But of course, those virgins are too delusional to actually use their brains."

"That's why I'm trying to gather information. Forcing them to cut off ties with those girls would probably yield a bad result. I'll make my own plans for this."

"I see... Well, if it's you, then everything will probably work out in the end." Kikyou looked at me with a shrug.

Kikyou told me everything she knew about Kinoshita Minori and Manabe Shiho. As Ike said earlier, they're not in the same friend group. Apparently, Kinoshita is a spirited and athletic girl. She has a few friends in Class D, like Yajima Mariko, who's also sporty.



Meanwhile, Manabe Shiho is somewhat of a gyaru, much like Karuizawa and her friends. Of course, Manabe's friends are similar to her in that regard.

Hmm... This is pretty tricky. I always intended to catch two fishes in one place and in one go, but I don't think it'll be possible at this point. Since Plan A won't work, then I guess it'll be Plan B. But as a result, I won't be able to use Kikyou.

"Well, that's pretty much it. I'm not that close to them yet, so I don't know if my knowledge would help much."

"No, it helped a lot. Thanks, Kikyou," I said.

"Is that all?"

"Yeah."

"What do you plan to do?" she asked.

"Hmm... I'm not sure yet. I'll ask for your help once I finish coming up with one," I said.

Kikyou stared into my eyes for a brief second before standing up.

"Alright," nodded Kikyou.

She thanked me before bidding farewell.

*My plan is already complete. Sorry, Kikyou. I can't use you this time.*



## SS.7 - First Name

May 10th, Monday.

Class 1-B's room was filled up with students. Their bustling conversations echoed across the place. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was currently hanging out with his friends, Miyake Akito and Sudou Ken.

"Oh, Kiyotaka, Ken. Get this, I actually hit a bullseye last Friday," Miyake shared with a smile.

"That's pretty sick, eh? Ahh... I miss playin' basketball already. Can't you just implant yer knowledge into my brain, Kiyotaka?" asked Sudou.

"If I could do that, then I would've done so already," Ayanokouji replied with a shrug.

The noise gradually lessened but the three boys didn't really notice. The overall decrease in the sounds was caused by the girls. When they heard Ayanokouji's first name casually getting used by Sudou and Miyake, they were instantly intrigued. They abandoned their previous conversations and started whispering amongst each other.

*"T-They're using Ayanokouji-kun's first name!"*

*"Oh my god! I want to, as well!"*

*"Kiyotaka... Such a cool-sounding name..."*

*"Ahh~, Kiyotaka-sama~!"*

Apart from the girls' reactions, everything was fairly normal until their other friends, Sakura Airi and Hasebe Haruka, arrived at the scene.

"Oh, there you guys are! Good morning, Miyacchi, Kencchin, Kiyopon!" Hasebe greeted her three male friends with a smile.

The girls felt a disturbance in the force the moment they heard her.

*"K-K-K-Kiyopon?!?!"*

*"What in the-?!"*

*"I'm so jealous!"*

*"I want to be tutored by him too! The amount of benefits is too much!"*

*"I wonder how she feels like, being so privileged."*

The meek Sakura Airi bowed her head lightly and greeted the boys as well.

"G-Good morning, Ken-kun, Akito-kun, Kiyotaka-kun." It was her



first time greeting boys using their first names with such feelings. At that moment, Sakura felt like they were really friends.

*"Ahhh!!!"*

*"Even Sakura-san got ahead of us!"*

*"So enviable!"*

*"Kiyotaka-kun!"*

*"Kiyotaka-sama! Kiyotaka-sama! Kiyotaka-sama! Kiyotaka-sama!"*

If it weren't for the other boys' loud conversations, the girls' whispers might've been audible to Kiyotaka himself.

July 1st, Thursday.

About half of the class were inside the room, feeling restless and happy. After receiving 78,900 points this morning, the students of Class 1-B began talking about it nonstop, both in the class group chat and in the classroom.

However, when the class's one and only Kushida Kikyou entered the room, the students' attention shifted to an entirely different topic.

"Good morning, Kikyou-chan!" greeted Mii-chan.

"Kikyou-chan!"

"Heya, Kikyou-chan~!"

Kushida was a very friendly girl. It was a natural occurrence for most of the class to greet her when she enters the classroom, much like the class's pretty boy, Hirata Yousuke, and their class leader, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

"Oh, Kiyotaka-kun, good morning!" Kushida greeted with a beam.

Ayanokouji was busy talking with his friends, but of course, he noticed Kushida's momentous entrance. When she greeted him so intimately, the atmosphere of the entire classroom froze.

"Good morning, Kikyou..." Ayanokouji greeted with a nod.

"O-Oh! First names! You two have gotten really close, huh?" said Onodera Kayano.

"Like, so clooose~!" followed Azuma Sana.

"Well, I guess it was only a matter of time. I mean, we call each other by our first names or nicknames too, right, since we're close friends?"

"You're right!"

"Ahaha, that's true!"

Ayanokouji's female friends, Hasebe and Sakura weren't in the room yet. They would've been surprised by this, too.

The other girls weren't as shocked compared to that time when the two of them called Ayanokouji by his first name...

*"I guess this would've happened sooner or later..."*

*"I was shocked, but after thinking about it for a bit, I'm actually*



*surprised that they only decided this now."*

*"I wonder if something happened to progress their friendship like this?"*

However, the boys thought differently. Yamauchi Haruki and Ike Kanji led some boys towards Ayanokouji's group, looking displeased.

"Ayanokouji, you snake! How dare you make moves on Kushida-chan like that?!"

"You did something behind our backs, didn't you?!"

The other boys didn't look as bothered, but of course, they were also curious (and envious).

"What? Why does it matter? It's just names," he mused.

"The hell? Why do you guys even care? You're not even that close with Kushida. Who're you to question what's happenin' with them?" barked Sudou.

"Wh-?! Don't involve yourself in this, Sudou. Ayanokouji has been in an alliance with us. We had a pledge!" said Ike.

"A pledge?" Even Miyake was confused.

"Yeah! You told us that you didn't like Kushida-chan, right, Ayanokouji? You broke that oath!" replied Yamauchi.

"First of all, that wasn't an oath or a promise. I just answered your questions. And my point still stands. I don't see her that way. I don't even see anyone that way..." Ayanokouji looked disinterested as he himself.

"As if we're gonna believe that! I bet this whole first name thingy was your idea!"

At that moment, Kushida approached them curiously.

"Is everything alright?" she asked. "I thought I heard my name, so I got curious."

"O-Oh, Kushida-chan we were just-"

"They're houndin' Kiyotaka because he's calling you by your first name or somethin'. I dunno, but they're noisy so it's annoying me," Sudou spoke with an irked expression.

"Wha-- Sudou!" The boys panicked instantly.

"Ah... I was the one who asked Kiyotaka-kun for it... Is there any problem?"

"N-No! We just got curious so we decided to ask him about it. Ahaha!"

The boys backed off with dejected expressions on their faces. It seems like they were thoroughly defeated.

*"Well, it's Ayanokouji, so I guess it's only natural."* was the only thing they could think of to justify this defeat.

At that moment, Kiyotaka thought; "First names are a pretty big deal, huh?"



## Vol. 2: Chapter 5.1 - Scheme

"Miyamoto, Hondou, can I talk to you guys for a bit?" I asked.

"Hm? Ayanokouji?"

"Sure, what's it about?"

I've been closely involved whenever Ike and Yamauchi brag about their progress with the Class D girls. Though they rarely hung out during breaks, Kinoshita and Manabe were steadily getting closer to them. Or at least that's what they told us.

I led Miyamoto and Hondou to a pretty unimposing part of the building. Students who'd pass by could easily spot us, but our position made it so that eavesdropping would be impossible.

"Alright, I'll need your help." I got straight to the point.

"Huh?" Hondou tilted his head.

"This is about Ike and Yamauchi, right?" asked Miyamoto.

"Yeah, both of you are still skeptical about Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san. right? To be honest, I'm the same. Of course, I hope I'm wrong, but we can never be too careful."

"Heh, I knew you were in doubt too, Ayanokouji. There's no way that you, of all people, will let this obvious bait slide," Miyamoto shrugged haughtily.

"Hmm... I think I understand, but what can we do, at this point? We should've stopped them as early as Monday?" asked Hondou. "It's Friday now. Those two would cease at nothing just to get a girlfriend."

"No... If my instinct serves me well, Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san will confess either on the weekend, or next week."

"Huh?! Confess?" Hondou flinched after realizing the amount of noise he made. "E-Eherm. Sorry... Anyway, I'd believe it if you said that those two will be the ones who'll confess... But Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san...?"

"Yeah... We've hung out with them and their friends a few times, and to be honest, I can notice their disinterest and disgust sometimes," added Miyamoto.

"Then, isn't that more proof? Remember, we're under the impression that they're just baiting Ike and Yamauchi. To be honest, one week should've been more than enough to make a fake confession believable. If they're really disgusted on the inside, wouldn't they want everything to end quickly?" I explained.



"-And execute their plan as soon as they can, huh? You say that, but do you even know what their plan is, exactly?" asked Hondou.

"Of course not," I shrugged. "But I have a few ideas. Firstly, they might just be trying to make fun of Ike and Yamauchi. It's messed up, but harmless in the grand scheme of things. I wouldn't be too worried if that's the case... But what if they frame them about doing something that they didn't do?"

"Hey, hey... That's some hardcore shit, Ayanokouji. You really think they'd do that?" Miyamoto was surprised by my words.

"Remember what they tried to do with Ken."

"Wait... Look at from this angle, Soshi. It would be sad if Kanji and Haruki were just getting pranked... But Imagine if they get framed for committing sexual assault or something? It won't just cause damage to them, personally. The class might also get affected," Hondou mused nervously.

"Oi, they might even get expelled if that happens, right?" Miyamoto finally panicked a little.

"You can see the gravity of the situation now, don't you? Remember how crafty their plan was with Ken, right? Not to mention the amount of class points they made Class C drop."

"Damn... Class D is pretty wicked."

"So, what do we need to do, Ayanokouji?"

"Keep yourselves updated on Ike and Yamauchi's actions. If a confession is set in stone, find out the details, specifically, the time and place," I instructed. "If the location is good enough where you can eavesdrop without getting caught, you'll use your phones to record whatever you'll hear. Of course, if it a normal confession, you can just leave them alone continue with your day."

"I see... That could work. But what are you going to do if the setting makes it impossible for us to eavesdrop... like our location right now?" Hondou asked looking around our current place.

"Hmm... Since it's going to be a confession, the chance of that happening should be pretty low. But if it were to be the case, then I'll come up with something else. For now, that should be our initial plan," I replied.

"Alright, we're in. I'll take care of Kanji and Kinoshita-san. Ryoutaro will be in charge of Haruki and Manabe-san," chuckled Miyamoto. "But of course, there will be payment, Ayanokouji."

"Ohoho... Hell yeah, there is." Hondou smiled sinisterly.

"Oh, sure... What do you guys want?"

Alright, I'm ready for anything. If it's these guys, I'm sure they'll ask for something manageable.

"P-Put in a good word for us with Kushida-chan and the other girls, please!"



"Yeah... We don't really care about points since we have more than enough, but all of the girls' attentions are on you, so you're our only chance!"

"Oh..." This was surprising, for sure... But luckily, it's within the realm of my expectations.

"I mean, the girls were split between you and Hirata, but ever since he and Karuizawa got together, the girls that liked him basically abandoned ship and turned to you." Hondou shook his head with a bitter smile.

"We felt really hopeless the first time, you know? After all, it's *the* Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. There's no way we'd win against you." Miyamoto nodded in agreement, but he faced me with a hopeful expression. "But you're not into anyone, right? If things continued that way, then we might get a chance with the others."

"I mean, I guess? Wait, alright... First, consider your request done. It should be easy enough. But I have to ask. Aren't you guys interested in anyone from the other classes?" I asked.

"Well, there are surely some beauties from other classes. Ichinose Honami from Class C is a prime example, or the rumored Sakayanagi Arisu of Class A... But c'mon, do you think we even have the chance to become friends with them?"

"Yeah... Trying to befriend guys from other classes is hard enough. With girls? Heh, average Joes like us could only dream from the sidelines. It's been that way ever since May came."

"I see, I get where you guys are coming from. I'll be sure to mention your names in a good way whenever I can."

"Hehe, thanks, Ayanokouji!"

Of course, I wouldn't have accepted if they wanted to do anything sketchy, but was a surprisingly wholesome request.

That night, we made a group chat.

(18:23) [Oya?]

(18:23) [It sure is amusing for us to be summoned here.] (Professor)

(18:23) [I made this group chat to commemorate the budding youth of our dear friends.] (Hondou)

(18:24) [Haha.]

(18:24) [So, when are you guys confessing?] (Miyamoto)

(18:24) [The hell is this?] (Ike)

(18:25) [I'm planning on confessing next next week!]

(18:25) [Maybe on the 19th.] (Yamauchi)

(18:25) [Ugh.]

(18:25) [I don't want to confess on the same day as Haruki.]

(18:26) [That wouldn't make ours special. Maybe on the 23rd?] (Ike)

(18:26) [Good luck.] (Ayanokouji)



So they're planning to confess, after all. It's good that they wanted to take things slowly. If my guess is correct, then Manabe and Kinoshita will confess first. There's a 99% chance that they'll do it on the same day. After all, they can't sabotage the two of them on separate days. The first victim might warn the other. Or, they could just opt to frame one of them and let the other be. Of course, the more suspended students on our side, the better it is for Class D.

(18:26) *[Isn't our relationship making a positive change for everyone?]*

(18:26) *[If it weren't for us, Kinoshita-chan wouldn't even become friends with Manabe-chan.]* (18:27) *[They said they didn't know each other before we decided to hang out together.]* (Ike)

(18:27) *[Yeah! We're spreading friendship everywhere.]* (Yamauchi)

Of course, they'd play dumb. But I guess Ike and Yamauchi are too lovestruck to notice anything.

Everyone spent their days in peace while preparing for the final exam, and before we knew it, it was Monday.

"You're doing something, aren't you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

My friend and neighbor, Horikita Suzune, suddenly spoke to me.

"Hm? Doing something?"

"Hirata-kun, Kushida-san and, I talked about this. Kushida-san told us that someone is being targeted in our class and that you're trying to protect them. She also said that you have your own plans so we didn't need to pry," she explained.

"Ah, yeah. I wasn't really keeping it a secret. Everything's going according to plan, anyway?"

"I see. Well, if you say so," Horikita sighed. "But tell us if you need assistance. Hirata-kun said he's worried."

That's so like him...

"Are you worried about me too, Horikita?" I teased.

"No, not at all... If you, yourself, are saying that everything's going as you foresaw, then I have nothing to worry about," she replied, turning away from me with a nippy expression.

I don't really know what to expect, but hopefully, everything works out on the first try. It'd be annoying to do extra work.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 5.2 - Precursor

During the weekend, Ike went on a date with Kinoshita (on Saturday) and Yamauchi went on a date with Manabe (on Sunday). I tried to monitor their movements but as expected, a bunch of guys from Class D was patrolling around them secretly inside Keyaki Mall.

Miyamoto and Hondou were on standby. I was ready to give them the signal to move if I ever felt like either of the girls planned to confess.

At the end of the day, nothing happened, which was fairly expected since Ike and Yamauchi were the ones who asked them out on two separate days.

I was readying some things before a person knocked on my door. I hurriedly hid the items and received the guest.

"Good evening, Kiyotaka-kun," Kikyuu greeted me with a smile.

"Come in, I've got tea and coffee."

"I'll have some coffee then."

Kikyuu sat on my bed. She shared some of her frustrations with me, but they were much lesser than usual.

"What's with that look?"

"Ah, nothing. You didn't seem to have it as bad as the previous times."

"Oh, that? Hmm... I don't know. I just feel a lot better recently. I'm sure a large part of it is because of you, Kiyotaka-kun. Having someone... whom I can share my deepest thoughts with is much more extricating than I expected," she said.

"Is that so...?"

"Yep!" Kikyuu nodded with a smile.

"Then, can I share some of my worries with you?" I asked.

Kikyuu perked up and faced me.

So bright...

Well, she didn't really exude any physical form of light, but her smile was so wide that I reflexively winced.

"I've been waiting for this, Kiyotaka-kun! Come, tell me everything and anything!" Woah, she's really enthusiastic about this.

"I'm having second thoughts now. You might use my secrets as weapons, after all..." I joked.

*Thud.*



I stepped on a landmine. Kikyou punched me in the chest as hard as she could. It hurt a little, but that didn't really matter too much. What caught my attention was her displeased face.

"I won't... do that..." she said with a strained voice.

It looked like she was about to cry.

"Sorry, Kikyou. I was just kidding..."

It seems like her trust in me has grown extensively for the last couple of months.

"Really?"

Right now, Kikyou wasn't putting on her angelic act. As she mentioned earlier, she's becoming more and more dependent on me. It doesn't matter whether she's aware of this or not. Our relationship made it so that this was the natural progression of things. I knew this right from the moment Kikyou said she trusted me.

"Yeah, I guess I really shouldn't tell jokes like that when it's so hard to tell if I'm being serious or not."

"I just... I felt like you didn't trust me at all when you said that. And it just made me feel sad."

I can't tell how genuine Kikyou's words are, but I have to act sincerely.

"Sorry."

I trust Kikyou. I trust her very much. As long as her way of life doesn't change, as long as she continues to crave other people's praises and worship, the suffering she'd endure will never come to an end. And I'm the only one who can ease that suffering. As long as I can control her, she's the most trustworthy and powerful piece I can have.

"Well, your bad joke aside. Feel free to tell me anything that's bothering you. You're always the one who helps me. I would feel a lot better if I can pay you back in some way." Kikyou said while pointing her little finger towards my nose.

I nod.

"You see, Kikyou... I didn't really have to step down as the class's leader..."

"Huh? Wasn't that decision a part of your strategy?" she cocked her head wonderingly.

"I'll be honest. I think I can still fend off any schemes from other classes regardless of my position in class... But I really want Horikita, Hirata, and you to be the true leaders to Class B."

"Wait, huh? What are you talking about, Kiyotaka-kun? You're the only fitting leader for Class B! Sure, that Horikita is smart and all, but she's nothing compared to you. And Hirata-kun's pacifist attitude would just make our class a punching bag," Kikyou



explained with an exasperated and worried expression.

"Of course, I know that there's room for growth. But, I want all of you to be able to stand up on your own. I know you guys can do it, especially with your help."

"What...? Why the heck are you saying this? It's like you're leaving us or something."

"I... Yeah, that might be right... I might leave you guys someday. And by that, I meant that there's a chance that I'll drop out," I said.

Kikyou was visibly shaken by my words.

"What... are you talking about, Kiyotaka-kun? Drop out? Why would you drop out?" she asked, her breathing slightly ragged.

I don't know what got into me, but I felt like I can open up to Kikyou... even if it's just a little bit. Before I knew it, I told her something that I never even planned on mentioning to anyone in this school.

"My father doesn't agree with my enrollment here. He'll do everything he can to get me out of this school."

"What...? So you enrolled here without his permission?" she asked. "But doesn't the school prohibit any form of contact with the outside? If what you're saying is true, then what can your father even do?"

"He's a powerful man, and he has the means to do it. That's all I can say. Of course, I don't want to drop out. I want to graduate with everyone... But if there's a chance where I'll have no choice but to do so, then I don't want the class to crumble." I looked at Kikyou straight in the eyes.

"That's... That's not right... You can't just..." Kikyou can't seem to accept what I'm saying.

Instead of prying further, she's more bothered with the fact that I might drop out.

"Objectively speaking, shouldn't that be a good thing for you, Kikyou? Horikita doesn't know the details of your past, and I'm the only one who really knows about your other personality. Once I'm gone, you won't have that lingering fear anymore."

"That's not it! You can't drop out!" she yelled.

"Why?"

"You're-!" Kikyou seemed to realize that she's getting a bit too worked up when she looked into my eyes. She calmed herself before continuing. "You're vital for Class B's advancement to Class A. And even if I don't mention your overall benefits for the class, it'd be an inconvenience for me, too. You're the only person with whom I can share my real thoughts. What if someone else catches me... like how you did?"

No one would be able to uncover the truth once she puts her



guard up, so that argument lacks potency. As I said, it's more beneficial for Kikyou to let me drop out. Saying such unselfish things isn't like her at all. It's one thing if she's acting right now, but none of her actions indicate that at all.

"Hmm... Don't worry about it too much, Kikyou. I'll do everything I can to stay here. And having Horikita grow with the rest of the class isn't the worst thing we could do. I think it's much better than solely relying on me."

"I see... You're right," she replied, her eyes cast downwards.

Before the silence went on for too long, I took the initiative to speak.

"I thought you hated me."

Kikyou glared at me with a pout.

"I was pissed at you before, okay? I still haven't forgiven you for being a perverted jerk... Telling me to spread my legs and take off my top..."

"Oh, yeah... Sorry about that," I scratched my head guiltily.

"Shut it. You let me punch you, so I guess I was a bit satisfied," she sighed. "I don't hate you, Kiyotaka-kun. Unlike the people that I have dirt on, I don't really see you as an enemy. You're my friend, like Kokoro-chan or Ryuuko-chan who are genuinely good girls."

"I see... That's good then. I really don't want you as an enemy."

"Same here. You're too smart for anyone to handle. I'd rather have you as a true friend," she shrugged.

Kikyou and I sat side by side on my bed. After she said those words, I lay on my back and sighed. Kikyou look at me with a bitter smile.

"Let's talk about Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun's case instead," she said. "Is everything alright?"

I'm more than happy with sharing my progress regarding our current predicament.

"Don't worry. Horikita has already asked me about it, same with Hirata, on the phone. I have things under control. Well, at least I hope I do."

"Oh... Are you worried about something?"

"I mean, if Ryuen Kakeru really is their leader, then he's quite the schemer. I feel like he can see through my plans."

"Eh? If you're being serious, then isn't this bad?" Kikyou asked worriedly. "Is there anything that I can help you with?"

"Not at the moment. But if things get dangerous, I'll definitely ask for your help."

Kikyou nodded happily.

After talking about other things for a little while longer, Kikyou finally decided to return back to her room.



"Thank you for today again, Kiyotaka-kun..." she said.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow, Kikyou."

The worry in Kikyou's eyes was noticeable. She's still thinking about my words earlier.

When she left, I took out the items I hid in the drawer and put them inside my school pants' pocket.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 6.1 - Culling

July 12th, Monday.

"I gotta give it to you guys. I can't believe your date was a success!" Miyamoto patted Ike's back.

"Heh, unlike Kanji, I have a lot of experience." Yamauchi bragged with a confident expression.

"Shut up, Haruki. I bet your hands were sweating all over."

"N-No, they weren't!"

Professor greeted me as I approach the five of them.

"My, if it isn't the Shadow Leader himself?"

Shadow Leader?

"Oh, that's a cool nickname, Professor!" Hondou jumped in.

"Heh, how about *'The Dark Hand Behind the Curtains'*? Sounds pretty sick, right?"

"Oh! A wonderful suggestion, Soshi-dono. I shall add that to my database," Professor nodded in agreement.

"Stop calling me names so early in the morning..." I retorted.

I've been spending less time with the Ayanokouji Group, but I've explained the general idea of what's happening so my friends were fine with it. Frankly, I just want things to end quickly. We have our finals to worry about, for god's sake.

At that moment, a sound came from Ike's phone. Ike excitedly read the contents and his smile only widened after he finished.

"T-T-T-This is it!" he yelled reflexively.

"W-What the hell? What is it, Kanji?"

"Was it from Kinoshita-chan?"

"Look!" Ike turned his phone around so the screen will be clear for us to see.

(9:42) [Ike-kun...]

(9:42) [I have something to tell you after class. I'll be waiting for you behind Gymnasium #1. Please come alone. I'll be embarrassed if it's not just the two of us...]

Finally, huh?

"Holy shit, Kanji! She's gonna confess, isn't she?!" cried Yamauchi.

"I-I don't know! Probably?! Most likely?!" Everyone was getting swept up by the hyped atmosphere.

About a minute passed and Yamauchi's phone rang, too.

"K-Kanji, do you think-?"



"Ohh! Things are getting pretty spicy for you, huh, Kanji, Haruki?!" Miyamoto eagerly spoke.

Yamauchi showed us the contents of the message. They were fairly similar. However, Manabe asked him to come to the rooftop.

"I am happy for you, Kanji-dono, Haruki-dono," said Professor.

"Well, well. Let's not rush things. We never know what might happen..." I didn't want to be that guy, but they're getting too excited.

"What are you talking about, Ayanokouji?! These are obviously preludes to a romantic confession!" pressed Ike.

Apparently, they didn't even find anything weird about getting confessed to on the same day.

During lunch, I hung out with my friends along with Kikyou's group. The secret group chat that Miyamoto, Hondou, and I made was filled with shocked reactions from the two.

*(9:51) [Holy crap!]*

*(9:51) [I can't believe it!] (Hondou)*

*(9:51) [You actually called, it Ayanokouji!]*

*(9:51) [You're insane!] (Miyamoto)*

*(9:51) [We can't be too sure.]*

*(9:51) [Let's just hope that these confessions will be normal.] (Ayanokouji)*

*(9:51) [Yeah, hopefully.]*

*(9:52) [But it's certainly weird.]*

*(9:52) [I didn't expect the two of them to confess at the same time.] (Miyamoto)*

*(9:52) [Dang...]*

*(9:52) [It's super likely that this is Class D's plot, after all.] (Hondou)*

*(9:52) [Get ready, you two.]*

*(9:52) [This entire plan relies on your stealth skills.] (Ayanokouji)*

*(9:53) [Heh, you can count on us.]*

*(9:53) [My lack of presence will finally come in handy.] (Hondou)*

*(9:53) [If they turn out to be normal confessions, then I'll just try my hardest to hold my laughter in.] (Miyamoto)*

Hondou's role will be harder, for sure. If Manabe chooses a spot where they can see people entering through the door, then it would be extremely hard for him to get any decisive evidence. Anyway, all I can do is believe in them.

When the dismissal bell rang, I quickly approached the restless loverboy duo. As a friend, the least I could give them was some sort of encouragement.

"Ike, Yamauchi." I wrapped my arms around their shoulders. "Both of you, your times have come. Good luck, I'll be rooting for you guys."



"O-Oh... Ayanokouji... Thanks, man..." Ike scratched his head bashfully.

"Ayanokouji, dude. Thanks..." said Yamauchi with a similar expression.

"Heh, got get 'em, Kanji, Haruki." Miyamoto gave them a thumbs-up.

"It sucks that you guys got a girlfriend earlier than me, but I'd cheer my buddies on regardless," Hondou said with a smile.

Professor acted like a mysterious person, only fixing his glasses with a smirk.

When the two of them ran off, Miyamoto and Hondou nodded their heads to me as they proceeded with our plan.

This is it. It's your move, Class D-- It's your move, Ryuen. I'll wait.

Ayanokouji went back to the dorms with his friends. Meanwhile, Miyamoto and Hondou went on their separate ways. Hondou walked inconspicuously until he finally reached the third floor. Amidst the wave of students, he successfully reached the decisive corner on the way to the rooftop.

Miyamoto, on the other hand, exited the main building and walked towards the gymnasium's direction. The two of them felt the thrill. The task that Ayanokouji gave made the two of them feel like trusted agents of Class B's secret leader. Miyamoto and Hondou put their phones out and launched the voice recording app.

-And that's when they appeared.

"Woah! Ryuen-san's right! There really is someone!"

"He saw right through them."

"C-Class D students?!" Miyamoto flinched in surprise. He recognized one of the guys in front of him; Ishizaki Daichi, the one who clashed with Sudou.

One of them pinned Miyamoto against the wall, while the other grabbed his phone.

"W-What the hell?!" Miyamoto couldn't do anything as the student pinning him had more strength.

"Heh... You want to record stuff, huh, buddy?"

"Hey, give it back!"

"Sure, but tell me. Were you ordered by someone to do this?" asked Ishizaki.

"Huh? I just want to immortalize my friend's shitty reception of a girl's confession. What 'orders' are you talking about?" barked Miyamoto.

"Ohh... Ryuen-san's bet was right, huh. Class B's leader really is something."



Ishizaki tossed the phone back to Miyamoto, who was set free by the other student.

"There ya go. Get your ass outta here. Don't spoil the fun that's about to begin," Ishizaki chuckled with a mocking tone.

"Tch..." Miyamoto could only glare at them in indignation. They didn't plan on making him pass through.

Seeing no way out of the situation, Miyamoto left the scene with haste.

Near the rooftop stairway...

"Oho? Seems like a rat came to play."

"You're from Class B, aren't you?"

"W-Who the heck are you guys?" Hondou instantly panicked at the sight of three unfamiliar male students.

One of them quickly grabbed Hondou and rendered him unable to move. The student took the phone from his hand.

"H-Hey!" Hondou protested nervously.

He was terrified not only because he was outnumbered, but also because one of them was a largely built black male who didn't have the appearance of a high schooler.

"Oh... Ryuen-san's right. He really did plan to record it."

"G-Give that back!" Hondou cried in a cold sweat.

"Who's your boss?" asked the student.

"Boss? The hell are you talking about, man?" Hondou feigned ignorance.

"Someone ordered you to come here and record stuff, right?"

"We're in a damn high school. I'm trying to play a prank on my buddy. Why do you guys even care?" he replied.

"Is that so?"

The student gave Hondou's phone back to him as the other guy let go.

"Here, don't get in our way. Get out of here."

They stared at Hondou, waiting for him to leave. At that point, he couldn't do anything but walk away.

Ike arrived at their promised location. There, Kinoshita Minori stood with her arms crossed.

"Sorry for making you wait, Kinoshita-chan."

"It's fine," she replied curtly.

"I-Is everything alright? Why did you call me here?" Ike asked nervously.

"Nothing much," Kinoshita responded without looking at him.

"Kinoshita-chan...?"

At that moment, Ike realized that something was off.

"Oi, Kinoshita. We finished shooping the recorder guy away."



Ishizaki arrived at the scene.

"E-Eh? What are you doing he-"

*Smack!*

Ishizaki walked up to Ike and punched him across his right temple. It was a direct hit. If Ike was any less fit, he would've been knocked out in an instant.

"Augh-?!" Ike cried in pain as his body dropped to the ground.

"Can we get this over with? I've been spending precious time on this guy for more than a week now. I have other things to do," Kinoshita said impatiently. She didn't like seeing this kind of stuff, so she tried her best to look away.

"Agh... W-What... K-Kinoshita-chan...? What's happening...?" Ike crawled up feebly. He seemed to temporarily forget the pain of Ishizaki's punch. He was more concerned about Kinoshita's attitude.

"Don't rush it, Kinoshita. We need to do one last thing."

"Fine, hurry it up."

The student with Ishizaki yanked Ike's weak body up. He punched his stomach once.

"Ugh-!"

Seeing him in this state, Ishizaki grabbed Ike's hands and used them to touch Kinoshita's shoulders and arms.

"There we go. We have the fingerprints on your blazer."

Ike's hands were forced to touch the chest area of the blazer.

The student laid Ike's body near the wall. He checked Ike's pockets and found his phone.

"No recordings whatsoever," he said.

If one's phone was recording, it can be seen from the lock screen. Ishizaki took a peek and nodded in confirmation.

"We don't have anything against you, Ike. But you guys got ahead of yourselves. Our boss needed to take some serious measures," said Ishizaki.

Seeing them walk away, Ike could only curse in pain.

"Damn it..." he whispered before finally losing consciousness.

On the rooftop, Yamauchi arrived and saw Manabe using her phone.

"Manabe-chan, I'm here! Did you wait long-- Eh?! Who-?!" Yamauchi yelped in surprise.

Manabe stood by the tiny area beside the entranceway. Since the security camera only has a view on the open area up front, both sides were complete blind spots. Upon entry, Yamauchi saw a guy beside Manabe.

"Kukuku, our guest is here," the student said with a sinister smile.

"W-Who the hell are you, man? Why are you with Manabe-chan?" Yamauchi asked with a displeased yet nervous expression.



"Calm down, Yamauchi Haruki. Let's wait for the rest of the gang."

"The what? What the hell are you talking about? Manabe-chan, what is this?" Yamauchi turned to Manabe, who was busy fiddling with her phone.

"Tsk, can you not talk to me? It's really gross." Manabe didn't even bat an eye in expressing her disgust towards Yamauchi.

"What-?!" Yamauchi was shocked by Manabe's attitude. It was far from the Manabe that he had talked with for the past week.

"Ryuuen-san, we fended off the rat. We left Albert to guard the entrance."

Two of the three male students who confronted Hondou finally stepped foot on the rooftop. They ran up at a hurried pace, but that was all part of an act.

As it turns out, the person with Manabe was actually Ryuuen Kakeru. The rumored leader of Class D.

"Oh, good work, Kondou. Albert doesn't belong here. The place will be too cramped if he joins in," he said before widening his smirk. "Alright, hold him for me."

Yamauchi froze in fear and confusion after hearing Ryuuen's words. He stared at Manabe, who didn't even bother looking at him.

Kondou and the other student held Yamauchi on both sides. Ryuuen slowly approached Yamauchi.

"H-Hey! What are you guys-"

*Smack!*

Ryuuen punched him straight in the face without any hesitation.

"Aghhh-!" Yamauchi cried as his nose bled.

"That's no good, Yamauchi. Sexual assault isn't a cool thing to do. It might get you expelled, you know?" Ryuuen snickered with a dark yet ecstatic expression.

"Ugh..." Yamauchi was in a daze after Ryuuen's punch. He was on the verge of collapsing.

"Manabe, come here," Ryuuen ordered.

"Ugh, do I really have to? I can just take my blazers off and give it to you, right?"

"We don't want unnecessary fingerprints on your blazer, so shut up and do what I say. Or else, I'll have him touch your tits," threatened Ryuuen.

"Touch my-?! What the hell?! That's fucking gross." Manabe walked up unwillingly.

Ryuuen used Yamauchi's hands to touch Manabe in the same places that Ishizaki did with Ike's hands.

Ryuuen thoroughly checked each of Yamauchi's pockets. After looking at his phone, Kondou and the other student laid him against



the wall.

"Let get outta here," Ryuuken said with a grin.

Ryuuken and his entourage met up with Ishizaki, Kinoshita, and the other Class D student.

"Y-You're amazing, Ryuuken-san! You predicted their every move!" said one of them.

"Ryuuken-san, why didn't you let us press Miyamoto and Hondou for an answer? We could've found out the identity of their boss," asked Ishizaki.

"Idiot," answered Ryuuken. "We don't even know if they even have one. And even they did, their identity doesn't matter to me just yet. I've crushed two students on their side. Let's see how they can handle that."

"Haha, seems like their rise to Class B was a fluke, after all. They had much easier targets than Ichinose's Class C. If it weren't for that unlucky arrival of Sudou's friend, he might've been out of the equation, too," said Kondou.

"These Class B students sure know how to use their phones. In this school where lies, subterfuge, and foul play are key, things like voice recorders are powerful. Once you scheme, one piece of evidence can destroy you," he explained.

"As expected of Ryuuken-san," nodded the other student.

The student called Albert nodded with him.

At that moment, Ryuuken thought deeply.

*"I'm confident in my ability to see through people. I can guarantee that Yamauchi didn't expect any of the things that just happened, and the same should apply to Ike. We were overt with our plan, just like what we did to Class C. Hondou and Miyamoto, huh? Someone did receive my message, after all."*



## Vol. 2: Chapter 6.2 - Calamity

"Ayanokouji! This is bad!" Miyamoto banged on my door.

"This is seriously bad news, man!" And of course, Hondou's with him.

When I got up from my bed to receive them, their panicked faces instantly greeted me.

"I-It's Class D! They were there!"

"Shit, they really were plotting something!"

"Wait... First of all, calm down. Tell me what happened," I said.

"S-So we tried to follow Kanji and Haruki as planned, but some Class D guys blocked our paths."

"Based on their words, it seems like our own scheme was seen through from the very beginning. They even asked us if we were ordered by someone."

"We played dumb, of course, but Kanji and Haruki are pretty much at their mercy now. They also mentioned a guy named Ryuen. He must be Class D's leader."

"If what you're saying is true, then we're in deep trouble," I say after pondering their words.

"Shit, we need to hurry."

"It would've been different if either of us can put up a fight, but those Class D guys look like a bunch of meatheads."

"We shoulda roped in someone like Sudou..."

"No use in mulling over what's happened. For now, let's just try to wait for a few more minutes before contacting Ike and Yamauchi," I suggested and the two of them nodded.

Not long after that, we tried to text and call both of them... They didn't respond.

"Why aren't they-? The hell did those guys do to them? Did they confiscate Kanji and Haruki's phone or something?" asked Hondou.

"I have a bad feeling about this. Let's find them," I said.

Hondou and Miyamoto nervously agreed with a gulp.

We left the dorm areas and used an unorthodox path, trying to decrease the chances of having to encounter Class D students. If they really tried to frame Ike and Yamauchi and succeeded, they should be reporting what happened right now.

When we reached the area behind Gymnasium #1, the three of us witnessed an unconscious Ike sitting against a wall.



"Kanji!" The two cried.

I ran up to him immediately and shook his body.

"Ike, Ike! Can you hear me?" I asked.

"What the hell?! They punched him in the face!" Miyamoto glared at the bruise on Ike's right temple.

"Those Class D punks went too far! This is just plain violence!" howled Hondou.

I carried the half-conscious Ike up and had Miyamoto support him.

"Take Ike to the infirmary. Hondou and I will check on Yamauchi," I instructed.

"Alright, I'll leave him to you. Be careful," replied Miyamoto.

"You too."

Hondou and I walked briskly. When we finally reached the rooftop, we saw Yamauchi in a similar state.

"Shit, Haruki!" cried Hondou.

The two of us ran up to him. Like how I did with Ike, I checked up on Yamauchi's condition. His nose was bleeding. It was a direct jab to the front of his face.

"Those bastards..." Hondou clicked his tongue in anger.

We tread to the infirmary while supporting Yamauchi. We met up with Miyamoto and Ike. He was sitting on a bed while clutching his head.

"Ike, are you feeling alright?" I asked.

"Shit... We messed up, Ayanokouji. It was a ploy, after all."

Hondou and I laid Yamauchi down on the bed. Thankfully, due to the time of the day and the path we took, none of us encountered any students. Yamauchi slowly tried to sit up while groaning in pain.

"Ugh..." he moaned.

"Haruki..."

"I-It... was a guy named Ryuen. He... He was the mastermind behind this. Sexual assault...? Are you kidding me?" Yamauchi had a hard time uttering his words.

"What did he do?" I asked.

"It's as you can see, right? He used Kinoshita and Manabe to bait us. And now this..." Yamauchi clenched his fists in anger.

"Miyamoto, Hondou. Leave the three of us inside for now. Contact Kikyuu, Hirata, and Horikita. Tell them that it's an emergency," I said.

The two of them looked at each other and nodded with little hesitation. When they left, silence conquered the room. Ike and Yamauchi looked down resentfully.



"I didn't think that you two would get in trouble."

I broke the tension and tranquility, releasing my words with a pretty provocative tone. It totally sounded like I was blaming them.

"Seriously, Ayanokouji? We just found out that the girls we liked played us for a week before making us receive Class D's violence. Now we're gonna get framed for something we didn't do." said Ike.

"That's right... Is this really the time to drop more unnecessary pressure by blaming us? That's pretty insensitive of you," followed Yamauchi.

They looked at me with displeased expressions. I crossed my arms before sighing. It seems like they needed to hear it, after all.

"Unnecessary? Insensitive? Do you guys not realize whose fault this is?"

Hearing me bite back was unexpected to them. They stiffened up with a glare.

"The fact of the matter is; you two were so hung up on the idea of getting a girlfriend that you didn't even notice the obvious trap Class D laid down for you."

Ike and Yamauchi were shocked by my blunt words.

"W-What the hell?"

"If you suspected them from the start, then you should've warned us!"

"Do you really think your desperate and pathetic selves would listen to any warning that I'd give? Based on your past behavior towards my friendship with Kikyuu, I think you'd just lash out at me."

The two got even more upset as I continued offending them.

"Man, you're quite something else, aren't you, Ayanokouji?" glared Yamauchi.

"I didn't expect you to be an arrogant asshole. Do you think you can talk down on us just because you're smart and popular?" asked Ike.

"Am I really talking down on you right now? Am I not just telling you what the facts are?" I looked at them with cold eyes. "Why don't we talk about another topic then? You two were dumb enough to keep misbehaving whenever the teacher isn't looking. You didn't even realize that a bunch of security cameras inside our classroom were monitoring everyone's behavior. Why do you think our points went down by a lot in June? You two were the biggest contributor to that."

The two flinched in shock.

"What the... How do you even know if that's the case?!"

"I asked Chabashira-sensei, of course. She even showed me footage as proof," I replied despondently. "And I've observed you



two for the longest time. Apart from being the most unenthusiastic about studying, you two have the most undesirable reputation when it comes to attitude. Do you know how many girls have voiced out their opinions to me about the two of you? Most of them are repulsed by your attitudes. Of course, some of them might be exaggerating, but you get my point, right? A lot of the girls in our class are grossed out by your behaviors."

Cold sweat ran across their foreheads upon being confronted about those things.

"T-That's normal! We're just being high school boys!"

"Even if you don't admit it, you're just the same as us! We're just more open about it!"

"Are you hearing yourselves? Do you realize how disgusting your excuses are?" I gave them a side glance.

Without an answer, Ike and Yamauchi could only grind their teeth.

"Wouldn't you say that this is some sort of retribution? You two haven't done anything for the class. And now, just because there's a small chance for both of you to get a girlfriend, you threw caution to the wind and disregarded any possible consequences," I shrugged.

They continued to look down, unable to reply.

"I'm sure Kikyuu and Hirata will help the two of you, given their personality. Horikita won't have a choice since she wants to reach Class A. If you two get suspended, or worse, expelled, then our class points will suffer heavily. Really, this is a calamity."

"Fuck, we get it! We messed up, okay?!" Ike couldn't bear to hear any more criticisms.

"Damn it! Sexual assault? We didn't do anything like that for fuck's sake!" Yamauchi resentfully howled.

"The odds are stacked against the two of you. The Class D students have probably reported the so-called '*incident*'. Expect to be called out tomorrow and prepare for the worst."

"You're not gonna lend them a hand?" Ike asked with a glare.

Frankly, I kinda disagree with what Hirata said during my announcement of '*stepping down*'. It wasn't really my goal to protect everyone. Why would I waste my time protecting liabilities like you two? We're in Class B, but you're still acting like defects. If you were in my position, do you think it's worth spending so much effort to save a couple of dead weight? Well, that's probably something that Horikita would agree on. And that "*protection*" goal was just Hirata's personal interpretation of my actions, anyway.

"Who knows? I think Horikita is capable enough to speak for you, but without any decisive evidence, you're bound to lose."



"Damn it... Are we going to get screwed over because of this?" Yamauchi's expression sunk.

"Do both of you at least admit that you're at fault? We wouldn't be in this situation if you guys didn't let your crotches do the thinking."

"Screw you, Ayanokouji, but damn it, you're right. In hindsight, we could've been more careful."

"I... Damn it... Yeah, my bad. I'll admit to whatever... I just don't want that shit-faced Ryuuen guy to get what he wants."

Well, at least they looked remorseful.

I'll treat this as a test. If both of them continue to hold the class back in the future, then I'll have no choice but to eliminate them myself.

"I'll do what I can."

Not long after that, the door busted open and five people barged inside the infirmary.

Miyamoto and Hondou successfully brought Hirata, Horikita, and Kikyou. Of course, they needed to wear their school uniforms to be here.

"We've heard of what happened..." said Horikita.

"Is everything alright?" Hirata asked with a concerned look.

"Sorry, Hirata. My plan was compromised."

"Wait, *your* plan?" Yamauchi cocked his head.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun, can you explain everything to us? Right from the top..." asked Kikyou.

I nodded in agreement towards Kikyou's words.

I explained how I asked Hondou and Miyamoto's help in trying to prevent the plot that we anticipated Class D would do. We turned out to be right, but Class D also saw through our plan.

"So you really did try to protect us, Ayanokouji..." muttered Ike.

After that, Ike and Yamauchi told us everything that happened to them in detail.

"Class D's Ryuuen, huh?" Horikita had a grave expression.

Kikyou stared at me worriedly.

"This is bad... We have to brace ourselves for tomorrow," said Hirata.

I don't really care if things go public, but it would be pretty annoying if it did. Unlike Ken's case, they thoroughly planned everything this time. I doubt we'd win even if we all work together. They have Ike and Yamauchi's fingerprints, while we have nothing but testimonies.

That's probably what Ryuuen is thinking right now.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 7.1 - Disquieted

"Aren't Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun strangely quiet?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Well, I don't particularly mind it. It's honestly better than their usual obnoxiousness."

"Are those bandages?"

"Did a fight happen...?"

Ike and Yamauchi were stiff and nervous the whole morning. The bruises on their faces were also noticed by everyone. Since most of our classmates weren't aware of the catastrophe that was about to hit us, everything went on normally for the rest of the day.

"Ike, Yamauchi, come to the faculty with me."

After our last homeroom, Chabashira-sensei called them out with her usual expression.

"Sensei, can we come along?" asked Hirata. Horikita and Kikyō stood up along with him.

"Oh, the class representatives? If you want to get involved, Ike and Yamauchi would have to give their consent," Chabashira-sensei replied as she looked at the two of them for confirmation.

"Yes... Please let them come," said Ike.

"Alright, let's go then."

When the five of them left, the class instantly erupted.

"Ayanokouji-kun, what was that?!" asked Satou.

"I knew something was up. Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun were acting weird all day..." commented Matsushita.

"Like, they were nervous as hell for whatever reason," added Karuizawa.

I got up and tried to fill them in.

"Everyone, do all of you remember that one case with Ken?" I asked.

"You mean the one where you speculated that Class D wanted to frame Sudou-kun for violence?" asked Okitani.

"Yeah. As it turns out, I was right. And now, Ike and Yamauchi are their targets," I nodded.

My words created an uproar.

"Hey, what the hell happened, Kiyotaka?!" asked Ken.

"Yeah, *'targets'*? How...?" followed Haruka.

"Hondou and Miyamoto were involved too. I asked for their help



so we can prevent anything from happening, but Class D predicted my plan... It's my fault," I replied.

"O-Oi... Why are you blaming yourself, Kiyotaka? What happened, exactly?" Akito was confused by my actions.

"N-No! You weren't at fault, Ayanokouji! You got everything right... We were just the wrong people for the job," said Miyamoto.

"Yeah... Those Class D punks tried to use-- no they did use violence against Kanji and Haruki, and we got threatened with it." Hondou and Miyamoto took the blame for themselves. I thought they used this opportunity to look good in front of the class. However, I observed their expressions and judged their genuine self-disappointment. After all, their buddies were in danger of getting expelled now.

Since the class got even more confused, I got straight to the point.

"To give context for Miyamoto and Hondou's words, I assumed that they'd probably do something similar to what they did with Ken. They will isolate their targets, lead them into an inconspicuous place with no cameras, then fabricate the situation into anything they want," I narrated. "I'm sure everyone has noticed Ike and Yamauchi's behavior last week, right? With Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san from Class D."

"Yeah! They were really excited about those Class D girls."

"So they really thought they'd get themselves a girlfriend?"

"Like, isn't that pretty pathetic?"

"And gross."

"Hahaha, I know right!"

"And two of them at the same time? It's obvious that something was up."

Woah, I just asked for your observation. Calm yourselves, girls. But then again, it's not like I can't understand where they're coming from. Miyamoto and Hondou weren't fond of hearing their friends get badmouthed, but it's not like they can defend Ike and Yamauchi and justify their actions. After all, since we presented our theory on Ken's case, they should've been able to tell that something wasn't right with Kinoshita and Manabe's timing.

"Well, Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san used their confessions as cover to lead Ike and Yamauchi into their trap..."

I proceeded to tell them everything that transpired yesterday, up until the moment when the class representatives arrived to ask what happened.

"S-Sexual assault?"

"Isn't that pretty bad?"

"Are they gonna get expelled?"

Their confusion turned into worry. I'm sure some of them didn't



really care about Ike and Yamauchi being in trouble. A lot of our classmates were more worried about our class points, but of course, they won't voice their thoughts out.

At that moment, Matsushita stood up.

"You seem to be taking the blame, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah, it was my mistake. I didn't think Class D would turn the tables on us. I was careless," I replied.

Matsushita was frowning. Apparently, she didn't like my words.

"I... don't think anyone of us has the right to blame you, not even Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun. After all, you did what you had to do... and they brought this onto themselves, anyway," she Matsushita.

"That's right, Ayanokouji. They were at fault."

"They should even be grateful to you."

"Miyamoto-kun and Hondou-kun, too. You two shouldn't blame yourselves."

Our classmates decided to speak out their thoughts.

"I have to admit. Kanji and Haruki may be my friends, but if it wasn't Ayanokouji, Soshi, or my fault, then those two's stubbornness should be blamed for this..." said Hondou.

"I failed to help them back when we tried to prevent this thing from happening, so I want to do what I can now, but no matter how frustrating it is, all we can do is leave everything to Horikita-san," added Miyamoto.

He's right. Chabashira-sensei's meaningful look told me that Class D's plan is indeed in motion. Once the investigations start, only Horikita can act as Ike and Yamauchi's lawyer of some sort. It's all up to her now.

Inside the faculty room, the five of us stood in front of Chabashira-sensei who was sitting behind her desk. Ayanokouji-kun told us everything that we needed to know yesterday, but as expected, I would've felt a little better if he was present.

"I assume that you have an idea of what has happened?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes, Class D accused Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun of sexually assaulting Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san. Is that right, Sensei?"

"You're right, Horikita. It's as you've said. Now tell me, is it true?" Chabashira-sensei looked straight into Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun's eyes.

"No! They lied. We didn't do anything."

"We're innocent, Sensei!"

"Hmm... I see." Sensei narrowed her eyes. "Well, regardless of the truth, you two are in deep trouble right now. The grievance procedure is almost finished. We've interviewed every student who



was involved in the incident. The only ones remaining are you two, the suspected main assailants."

Chabashira-sensei explained with her arms crossed.

"Sensei, what will happen after Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun are interviewed?" asked Kushida-san.

"We'll hold a hearing tomorrow, after class. You can bring one additional person to act as the defendants' representative. If you lose, Ike and Yamauchi will be suspended at best. Your class points would be compromised as a result."

"That's horrible... They didn't even..."

"Kinoshita and Manabe didn't want to make this public since they were afraid of the unnecessary attention. Based on their actions, it really felt like they were scarred. If you two really are innocent, then they're quite the actresses. Sakagami-sensei was especially convinced."

Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun could only look down in resentment.

"We'll leave it to you, Horikita-san... I don't think it'll be easy, but please do your best to help Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun," Hirata-kun plead.

If Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun are penalized, our class points will suffer. I'll do what I can to prevent that.

"I'll try my best," I nodded before looking at Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun. "Be consistent and only tell the truth. Don't say anything unnecessary."

"Yeah, 'will do."

"Alright..."

Since only the two of them will be interviewed, the three of us decided to head back.

"I wonder why Ayanokouji-kun didn't just tell them to avoid contact with Manabe-san and Kinoshita-san..." I pondered.

"Kiyotaka-kun told me that it would yield a worse result since he thought Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun wouldn't be convinced. He also said that even if it was practically an obvious plot, there's still a chance they really were interested in Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun," answered Kushida-san.

"He also considered their feelings. That's why he opted to keep an eye on them in secret. Ayanokouji-kun was thoughtful... It's unfortunate that Ryuen-kun saw through his plan, but Ayanokouji-kun's knowledge of Class D is limited so it couldn't be helped," added Hirata-kun.

"Even if it didn't show in his face yesterday, he must've felt responsible. He apologized and blamed himself," Kushida-san said with a worried expression. I always loathed her fake acts of kindness, but this time, I felt like her unease was genuine.



"If anything, it's Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun's fault," I sighed.

Somehow, everything still felt strange to me. Ayanokouji-kun wouldn't make such a sloppy plan. He isn't someone who could be seen through easily.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 7.2 - Reprisal

The students of Class B had different opinions on Ike and Yamauchi's case, but because everyone believed what Hondou and Miyamoto have told them, at least no one thought that Ike and Yamauchi were guilty. The very next day, most of the guys asked the two people of interest about the incident. Even though some of their usual enthusiasm returned, of course, Ike and Yamauchi were still a bit stiff about everything. Not only were they at the risk of expulsion, but their reputation inside the classroom, especially with the girls, worsened even more. It was no longer just a matter of them being a couple of annoying perverts. This time, they put the class at risk. Ichinose's Class C was only 121 points away from us, after all. For example, if their suspensions cost us 60 points each, then we're in critical danger. Any more than that, and we're going to be demoted to Class C.

The class kept everything closed, especially after Hirata and the rest relayed to us what Chabashira-sensei told them yesterday. We already got Ike and Yamauchi to agree with letting the class know about the incident during the 12th, anyway.

When class ended, Ike, Yamauchi, and Horikita proceeded to a conference room along with Chabashira-sensei.

Hirata spent some time with Karuizawa and their friends, so Kikyou and I remained in the classroom, waiting for the meeting to finish. We took two seats and moved them right next to each other (her idea).

"Are you worried about Horikita?" I asked.

"Huh? No, I'm not. Why would I be?" Kikyou replied with a glare.

"I see. So you're confident in her," I joked.

"I'll punch you, Kiyotaka-kun." The veins on her forehead were visible. Well, no, they weren't, but I felt like they were.

"I'm kidding. I *am* a bit anxious, though. She might not be able to bring her best out," I said.

When we asked Chabashira-sensei about the details of the so-called '*hearing*', she told us that it would be held by the student council led by the student council president. Horikita instantly stiffened upon hearing that.

"President Horikita, huh? What's up with the two of them?" asked Kikyou.



"I don't really know. Maybe Horikita has some confidence issues when her brother is around. He's quite accomplished, after all," I replied with a shrug.

"That's true. Horikita-san was originally placed in Class D, so I guess that might've been something that she's insecure about."

After talking about Horikita, Kikyuu and I caught up on stuff that was happening in our separate friend groups. In the midst of our conversation, she suddenly asked something strange.

"Do you want a girlfriend, Kiyotaka-kun?"

She wore an expression of curiosity, but her body language exuded nervousness and anxiety.

"I mean, as a normal high school boy, I guess I do?"

"T-Then... If a girl confesses their feelings for you... Would you accept them?"

Kikyuu's restless expressions were so adorable that I thought she was doing her cute-girl act again. However, anyone can tell that her jumpiness was authentic. I decided to answer seriously instead of making a joke.

"Hmm... I think it still depends on who the girl is. I'd probably reject them if I don't know anything about them. But of course, I'd still express my gratitude."

"Okay... But what if they're someone from Class B? You're close with all the girls in our class, right?"

Well, I'm probably friends with every girl in our class, but I'm not inclined to say that we're close.

"If they're a classmate, huh? That's pretty hard. Frankly, I would be speechless. I don't have any experience with things like romance, after all."

Kikyuu listened intently.

"Why do you ask, Kikyuu?" I think this should've been my first reply.

"I was just curious," she answered with a grin.

"It's just the two of us in here. You don't have to lie with such a cute smile." I narrowed my eyes.

"That's no good, Kiyotaka-kun. You can't easily call a girl's smile 'cute'. They'd surely get the wrong idea," said Kikyuu.

"Don't dodge the topic by lecturing me. Answer my question seriously as I did with yours."

Faced with my steadfast interrogation, Kikyuu could only mope.

"U-Ugh... I can't say it..." she pouted.

I stared at Kikyuu while staying silent.

"Ah, fine... I think a girl in our class plans to confess their feelings for you soon. It's supposed to be a secret but here we are. Be sure to act accordingly when it happens, okay? And don't snitch on me!"



she said.

"I see... Well, I guess that's fine. It's not like the girl you're talking about would be able to tell anything even if I don't act surprised. Everyone in Class B knows how I am."

"I-I suppose that's true."

"Is it alright if I ask who the girl is?" I asked, my curiosity getting the best of me.

"Of course not. I already told you this much so just be satisfied with it. Everything was supposed to be a secret but you made me spill the beans..."

"You started this topic. It's technically your fault."

"B-But if I didn't say anything, you'd just suspect that I'm asking for myself!"

"You're probably right."

"See?!"

I wonder... If Kikyou didn't decide to forge her perfect persona, will everyone still like this flawed girl in front of me? Since the answer is most likely no, I guess I have no choice but to accept the reality that this Kikyou will never come out on the surface. She'll be buried within the lies of her phony kindness and goodwill... and I'll be there to accompany her.

"Kiyotaka-kun..." Kikyou muttered my name while looking away.

"Hm?"

"If... I'm the one who asks you out... Would you say yes?" she asked.

"Yeah, I would," I replied instantly.

"-?!" Kikyou slapped my arm with force. "You're teasing me!"

Of course, Kikyou knew that I wasn't telling the truth.

"An eye for an eye. I told you; it's futile to try and get a reaction out of me. I don't have any romantic experience, but that won't make me an easy target for teasing," I said before looking away. "Even if I *was* embarrassed, you won't see it in my face if I try hard enough."

"E-Eh-?" Kikyou's upset expression suddenly became confused.

"Let's go. The hearing should be over by now."

I stood up and walked towards the door.

"Wait! What did you mean by that?! Are you actually embarrassed?" she asked.

"No, I'm not," I answered without looking at her.

"Ugh, that's not fair, you liar! Hey, don't leave me here!"

When Kikyou and I arrived at the place, we could still hear the voices from inside the room. We decided to stay and wait. From what I can make out of their words, it seems like they're finishing



up. But before we could receive Horikita and the other two, a bunch of people arrived led by a familiar face.

"Oh? If it isn't Kikyuu? I expected to see you here, but not with this guy. Where's Hirata?"

According to the list, this was Ryuuken Kakeru of Class D. Behind him were Oda Takumi, Nomura Yuuji, and Yamada Albert.

"Ryuuken-kun... Hirata-kun had other things to do..." she answered.

"Hey, you. You're Ayanokouji, right? You're one of the smartasses of Class D, and you're also a fast swimmer." Ryuuken addressed me with a smirk.

Knowing the main players of Class B isn't that surprising. Based on his words, Mii-chan, Matsushita, and Yukimura might also be on his radar. I can immediately tell that he isn't a simple person. He'll be able to tell a few things if I respond, but the same thing will happen if I choose to stay silent.

"Heh, interesting. Well, whatever. I'm here to fetch my classmates like you two. But still, I can't believe Ike and Yamauchi would pounce on Kinoshita and Manabe. If we weren't there, who knows what could've happened?"

"Ike-kun and Yamauchi wouldn't do such things!" Kikyuu responded strongly, albeit with a soft voice.

"Hoh? Then you're saying that the two victims are lying? Aren't Kinoshita and Manabe your friends, too, Kikyuu?"

"That's..."

"You're willing to condone Ike and Yamauchi's behaviors just because they're your classmates? Aren't you a girl, too? Can you really stomach those guys' actions?" Ryuuken bombarded her with questions. His words were heavy but they don't match with his facial expression. He was smiling.

"That's enough, Ryuuken. The school will judge who's telling truth," I spoke.

"You finally stopped acting like a mute, Ayanokouji?" he scoffed. "Truth, eh? I trust the school would make a fitting decision."

At that moment, the door finally opened. Kinoshita, Manabe, Ishizaki, and Kondou were the first ones to exit the room.

"Ryuuken-san," Ishizaki greeted with a nod.

"Oh, you guys. How did it go?" asked Ryuuken.

Horikita finally appeared with Ike and Yamauchi in tow. The moment he saw Ryuuken, Yamauchi instantly howled in rage.

"Ryuuken, you bastard!"

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to, punk?" glared Ishizaki.

"Yamauchi-kun, don't make yourself look any worse," scolded



Horikita.

Seeing the same guys who ganged up on him that day, Yamauchi could do nothing but glower spitefully.

"Kuku, so you had Horikita Suzune speak for you, huh?" Ryuuen shifted his attention to Horikita and acted like Yamauchi was air.

"You must be Ryuuen-kun, right?" Horikita asked with a glare.

"The one and only," he smirked.

"Horikita-san, how did the hearing go?" Kikyou asked nervously.

"They will make a final decision after the next and last session on Friday, which will be the trial." she sighed. "I did the best I can do."

"I-I see."

Horikita acted like I was invisible.

Seemingly satisfied, Ryuuen snickered and turned around.

"I didn't expect you to prolong their suffering. Good work, Suzune."

"I don't know where you heard that from, but my first name isn't something that I want to hear out of your mouth," Horikita responded vexingly.

Ryuuen continued walking like he didn't hear anything. His classmates followed him closely.

When I took a peek inside the room, the elder Horikita was still discussing something with Chabashira-sensei and Sakagami-sensei. Secretary Tachibana was also with them.

"Let's go." I turned to the opposite direction and continued walking.

Judging from Ike and Yamauchi's expressions, the hearing didn't go too well for them.

"Ike, Yamauchi, I'll try to find some other way out of this, but don't count on it too much," I said.

"Ayanokouji..." Ike muttered while looking at me.

The two of them seemed to have mixed feelings about my words. They still remember the harsh words I threw at them in the infirmary.

"What are you gonna do, Kiyotaka-kun? Did you manage to figure something out?" asked Kikyou.

"Hmm... Not really. If negotiations are available, then that would be ideal."

Horikita did nothing but stare at me.

"I see... I hope everything goes well... I don't want to say that Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san are liars, but I want to believe in Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun's innocence," Kikyou said with a smile.

"Thanks, Kushida-chan..."

"You really are a nice person..."

Kikyou shook her head.



"If there's anyone you should thank, it should be Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san. They're the ones in action. Supporting everyone is the least I can do," she said.

Suddenly, Kikyō's phone rang. Hirata was calling her. She put the call in speaker mode so we can all talk to Hirata.

*"Kushida-san? Is the meeting finished?"*

"Hirata-kun! I'm with everyone right now. They can hear you."

*"Oh, I see. That's great then. Can I talk to Horikita-san?"*

"What is it, Hirata-kun?" asked Horikita.

*"How did it go?"*

"It's pretty bad. We couldn't do anything about Yamauchi-kun and Ike-kun's fingerprints. All I could do was delay their final decisions. Unless we find a witness from another class that contrasts their statements, getting sanctioned will be inevitable."

*"I... I see..."* I felt something strange with Hirata's tone. Normally, he'd try his best to be positive, but he sounded really downtrodden. Is it because we're nearly in checkmate? *"Regardless, please tell me if I can lend a hand. I'll try to do what I can."*

He didn't sound optimistic at all, but I can feel his resolve from the other end of the call. If Hirata's planning to do what I'm thinking he'll do, it might interfere with my plan...

*"Kushida-san, Ayanokouji-kun, thank you for being there to support them. Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun, we'll try our best to help you until the end."*

"T-Thanks... Hirata." said Yamauchi.

"Yeah... Sorry about this, really." Ike clicked his tongue in frustration.

I'm sure both them can sense how hard it is for us to be involved in this case where we're bound to lose. Because I gave them a reality check two days ago, they must be thinking that we're only doing this because we have to-- that we think saving them is a waste of time for us. While it is true to some extent, I'm sure that's not the case for Kikyō and Hirata who are willing to help their friends even if their reasons and motivations are different. And right now, Horikita should be ingraining this incident to her memory, slowly normalizing it in her mind-- that sabotaging another class's students is normal and should be expected.

Katsuragi and Sakayanagi are the leaders of Class A, and Ichinose is the leader of Class C. Their identities and roles are out there. Ryūen must be thinking that Horikita or Hirata is the leader of Class B, but one thing is stopping him from being sure: The S-System. If they really were the leaders, then it would've been impossible for us to maintain such a high number of class points. It's not about how capable they are as a leader. It's about the class



they've been assigned to. Ichinose, whose class functions similarly to ours, have lesser points. It's not a stretch to say that Class B, in terms of unity, is just a lesser version of Ichinose's Class C. If that's the case, then how are we the higher class? Even Ryuen, who appear to control his class using tyranny, failed to maintain their points. The only exception was Class A, led by Sakayanagi and Katsuragi, who are still unknown to me. However, it's obvious that their methods worked. Ryuen must be thinking that Class B is being led by someone similar to those two.

Of course, he's wrong. We're only in our current position because I bought the explanation using our own class points, and Ryuen doesn't know that.

Regardless, I have to move soon.

*(14:56) [I'll bring my main ordnance to your room at 7:00, correct?]*

*(14:56) [Yeah, thanks.]*

*(14:56) [It's no problem, Ayanokouji-dono.]*

*(14:57) [The idea of helping does put a smile on my face, after all.]*



## Vol. 2: Chapter 7.3 - Always in Control

Earlier that day...

"Everyone in here should be aware of the situation. That's what you told me, right, Ayanokouji?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes, I've explained everything to the class," Ayanokouji-kun replied.

"Alright then, Ike and Yamauchi will be coming with me later for the hearing along with Horikita. If you can't defend yourselves today, we'll have to treat it as a trial and make a decision right then and there. Sakagami-sensei and I will be there to aid the student council in presiding over the hearing," she explained.

The student council...? The hearing will be led by Nii-san? What will he think about this? Our class has gotten in trouble... and it's up to me to try and fix it... Will he think of me as a failure once again?

"Horikita? Are you alright?"

I didn't realize that I was absentmindedly staring downwards until Ayanokouji-kun called out to me.

"You're worried about your brother being there?"

"No, I'm..." I tried to deny it, but the tone of my voice told him otherwise.

"Get it together, Horikita. We can't show any weakness right now." Ayanokouji-kun uttered those words without looking at me.

"Yes, I know that..." That's right. I know that much... It's just that...

"Come to the last end of the hallway on the third floor later. I need to talk to you about something," he said.

When lunchtime arrived, I finished my meal before immediately proceeding towards the place Ayanokouji-kun talked about. I got there and saw his waiting figure. The small open window on the top-most part of the wall illuminated him in a very picturesque manner.

"You didn't ask Hirata-kun and Kushida-san to come?" I asked.

"No, you're the only one I need to tell," he replied.

"What is it?"

"It's about this case, of course. What do you think of it?" he asked. I see... He wants my opinion, huh?



"It's a losing battle, Ayanokouji-kun. I've racked my brain last night, thinking of any possible argument to save Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun... But it's no use. We don't have anything. They have concrete evidence, while we have nothing but logic to twist their statements. In the end, they'll be punished by the school," I explained.

There's no way out. We got completely caught off-guard. But seeing Ayanokouji-kun's calm expression, it doesn't seem like everything's lost... Or at least, that's what I'm hoping for.

"To twist their statements, huh? Well, if you can do that, then you don't have to worry Horikita. That's all we need."

"What? It'll do nothing but draw out this case."

"That's right, perpetuate it. It doesn't matter if it's next week, on Friday, or tomorrow. You just have to prevent them from making the final decision today. If you can do that, then we'll win." he said, looking at me straight in the eyes.

Those were the eyes of someone who's telling the truth. Somehow, the anxiety that's been gnawing on me from the inside slowly disappeared.

But... we'll win? How?

"What are you saying...? Do you have some sort of plan?" I asked.

"I'll tell you everything once this is over."

This again...

"You've said that before, but you haven't told me anything."

"I'm serious this time. I'll explain everything to you after this, I promise."

I nodded. It's not like I have any other choice but to trust him. If there's anyone who can get us out of this situation, it's Ayanokouji-kun...

"I just need to delay them, right?"

"Yeah."

This is the perfect time to ask him the question that's been on my mind since this incident took place.

"Ayanokouji-kun... Did you really mess up? Did Ryuen-kun really see through you?"

He turned around and looked at me straight in the eyes.

"No, everything is going according to plan."

Ayanokouji-kun replied as if he was telling me something obvious. I saw the image of myself reflected in his eyes. Those were the same eyes that disturbed me since the first month. From that moment, I knew... Ayanokouji-kun had always been in control.



When we arrived inside the conference room, only Nii-san and her secretary were around.

"Oh, Sakagami-sensei and the students of Class D aren't here yet?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"They'll be here shortly," Nii-san answered. "Suzune? I see... I'm surprised that Ayanokouji isn't with you. He's just as involved in this case, isn't he?"

I initially thought he'd ignore me.

"That's..."

"Well, no matter. Sit down and wait for the other party."

I'm freezing up again. I need to focus. I can't mess things up now.

Before long, Sakagami-sensei, the class adviser and homeroom teacher of Class D, arrived with four of his students. Ishizaki Daichi, Kondou Reo, and the two "*victims*"; Kinoshita Minori and Manabe Shiho.

They immediately put on faces of revulsion upon seeing Yamauchi-kun and Ike-kun.

"Alright, since everyone is here, why don't we start the meeting?" asked Nii-san. "We'll start with a quick breakdown of the incident. Tachibana, please."

"Yes." she nodded. "According to Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san, they planned to call out Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun on the same day. They wanted to convey their feelings of interest towards them without asking to be in a relationship. However, Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun couldn't accept this and tried to force themselves onto them."

"That's not true!" yelled Yamauchi.

"Be quiet, Yamauchi-kun," I warned him.

"But-"

"She told you to be quiet, Yamauchi." Chabashira-sensei followed with a cold glare.

Yamauchi responded with silence and Secretary Tachibana continued her report.

"According to Ryuuen-kun, Ishizaki-kun, Oda-kun, Nomura-kun, Yamada-kun, and Kondou-kun, they wanted to look out for their friends, hence, they followed them. Manabe-san and Kinoshita-san also stated that they were aware of their friends' presence, and they felt thankful for their concern. According to the six Class D students, they immediately charged in to rescue Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san when they saw Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun grab them by the shoulder. They said that something felt weird when they heard Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun suddenly raise their voices." She looked at the four Class D students for confirmation. "Did I get everything right?"



"Yeah, we knew Yamauchi and Ike had a reputation of being a couple of sleazebags, so we were initially against their feelings. But as the week passed, we saw that they were having a good time with them. The two even became friends even if they didn't hang out with each other, initially. Ryuen-san had me and Nomura follow Kinoshita cuz' she was pretty athletic and could probably defend herself. The other four followed Manabe. In the end, they were terrified by Ike and Yamauchi's actions so we had to step in," said Ishizaki.

"I can attest to this. I have always observed the behavior of my students and Kinoshita-kun and Manabe-kun were noticeably livelier this past week. Manabe-kun also asked me for the rooftop keys, so I was aware of their confession that day," Sakagami-sensei added while shaking his head. "I never thought that such an incident would take place."

I don't believe that Sakagami-sensei was involved in any way. This could only mean that Ryuen-kun has taken the teachers' impressions and perspectives into account.

"Alright, Tachibana. You can now proceed with Class B's statements," said Nii-san. Secretary Tachibana followed with a nod.

"According to Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun, they were both called out by their respective partners in different locations. They said that when they arrived there, the attitudes of Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san were completely different. In Ike-kun's case, Ishizaki-kun and Nomura-kun arrived shortly after he got to their agreed location, which was the area behind Gymnasium #1. Ishizaki-kun approached and punch him before taking his hands to touch Kinoshita-san's blazers. Yamauchi-kun was called to the rooftop and was punched and set up by Ryuen-kun in a similar fashion. He also said that Ryuen-kun was already there when he arrived. They have adamantly claimed to be innocent, and that everything was Class D's plot to sabotage their class points." She looked at us before asking; "Did I get everything right?"

"W-What...?" Kinoshita asked in dismay.

"Are you serious...?" Manabe had the same frightened expression.

"Hey, Ike, Yamauchi?! What's with this bullshit?!" Ishizaki lashed out.

"The hell do you mean by bullshit?! It's the truth!" yelled Ike.

"Ishizaki-kun, calm down." Sakagami-sensei said as he fixed the position of his glasses. "Sexual assault is a serious thing. It is beyond my comprehension to see youngsters like you come up with such convoluted lies after scarring two female students. I'm appalled, to say the least, Class B."

"Well, of course, you can say that, Sakagami-sensei. The evidence



says it all," replied Chabashira-sensei.

"That much is obvious. Everyone in this room can clearly see how traumatized Kinoshita-kun and Manabe-kun are."

"I agree, I agree," nodded Chabashira-sensei. "But let's take the emotional and psychological stuff away for a moment and think about things logically. Is that alright?"

"Logically?" Sakagami-sensei narrowed his eyes.

"President Horikita, the defendants' group is allowed to speak now, right?" Chabashira-sensei turned to Nii-san.

"Sure," he nodded.

"Go ahead, Horikita. Tell us what you have in mind."

Keep it together. I have one job and I must do it right. I don't have time to think about anything unnecessary.

"Yes," I nod. "First of all, I assume that Hondou-kun and Miyamoto-kun have been interviewed as well? They were directly involved in this case, too."

"Yes, they have. According to their testimonies, they wanted to play a prank on Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun by recording their responses on what they all thought to be Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san's confessions. Miyamoto-kun stated that he encountered Ishizaki-kun and Nomura-kun while Hondou-kun encountered Yamada-kun, Oda-kun, and Kondou-kun. This was in conjunction with Yamauchi-kun's statement that Ryuen-kun was already waiting on the rooftop with Manabe-san. They claimed to have been pinned down, and that their phones were taken from them, saying that the Class D student who took it deleted any prior voice recordings."

So they decided to hide Ayanokouji-kun's part, after all. But Nii-san still saw through that and assumed Ayanokouji-kun's involvement.

Regardless, this is bad. Class D can easily deny Hondou-kun and Miyamoto-kun's testimonies.

"Hah? That's a load of crap. We may have seen some first years on the way, but we didn't talk to any," said Kondou-kun.

He's right. Firstly, they were careful enough to pin them down without touching their clothes. Secondly, we can't use Hondou-kun and Miyamoto-kun's phones to search for fingerprints because it's been saturated by others' at this point. We can't use fingerprints as evidence like they have. Lastly, their plan to act discreetly on Ayanokouji-kun's instructions backfired. We can't use witnesses to prove their involvement.

Wait... Witnesses?

"First of all, you can't immediately deny Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun's statements. The possibility of Class D fabricating the evidence



is still not out of the question," I started.

"What are you saying? The school's investigation showed that their fingerprints were indeed found on Kinoshita and Manabe's blazers. We even saw the incident happen ourselves!" said Ishizaki-kun.

"I won't question the fingerprints, but it doesn't deny Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun's arguments. They claimed that the fingerprints were your doing-- using their hands against their will to touch Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san's blazers."

"That's ridiculous! You don't even have any evidence for that!"

"Nor do you. We would immediately forfeit if you can give us footage or a voice recording. Do you have those?" I asked.

"What the hell? You're just arguing for the sake of arguing!"

"No. I think what I've said is considerably logical, given that Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun, Miyamoto-kun, and Hondou-kun's statements match. It's also logical to assume that you used violence to incapacitate Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun to proceed with your plans. They've said that, too, right?"

They used the fingerprints as proof. We claim that those fingerprints were fabricated. Minutes passed and our arguments would turn full circle once again.

We're in a stalemate. However, we're still in the worse position. If they had a well-spoken person on their side, this would've been much tougher.

"This is stupid. We're not getting anywhere. President Horikita, why don't you just sanction them so we can get this over with? I want to protect my students from these kinds of incidents."

"Why are you in such a rush, Sakagami-sensei?" Chabashira-sensei asked with a smile.

"And why do you want to drag this out, Chabashira-sensei? As a woman, I don't believe that even you would condone the behavior of your students."

"Of course not. However, you must first prove that my students are indeed in the wrong. I wouldn't have opened my mouth if the evidence refutes the statements of Ike and Yamauchi. But isn't the opposite happening? Their statements are perfectly against the fingerprint evidence that you're using against them. Even without bias, I wouldn't discount their claims of Class D's fabrication plot."

"I can't deny that, but that's just because they knew about what they've done. With how well-spoken and quick-witted some of the students in your class are, I'm sure they had a hand in forging the perfect counterarguments against our own claims. After all, they were interviewed last and had time to prepare. Logic aside, I simply can't ignore the psychological effects that this incident has caused



Kinoshita-kun and Manabe-kun."

"Well, I won't question the specifics since one party claims that they talked about confessing their feelings before getting assaulted while the other party claims that they weren't even given the chance to talk before getting punched and framed," Chabashira-sensei narrated. "However, you can't deny the weakness of the fingerprint evidence's potency because they only touched the arms, shoulders, and some parts around the chest area. No delicate body parts were violated at all."

"Of course, there weren't. Ryuuen-kun, Ishizaki-kun, and their friends acted immediately to prevent any further potential damage. Furthermore, we've already checked the rooftop footage, right? While nothing decisive was captured on camera, we clearly saw how rushed Kondou-kun and Oda-kun were when we saw their figure brush past the visible area. It clearly indicated an emergency."

The two teachers were engaged in a battle of wits and logic. They didn't show any openings...

"If I may interrupt..." Nii-san finally decided to speak. "The defense of Class B was fine, but in the end, sexual assault is still something that this school will not tolerate. Unless Class B can present us something concrete to deny Class D's claims that will back Ike and Yamauchi's testimonies, we'll still have to sanction them accordingly."

At that time, I spoke.

"We... have a lead. We'll find a witness outside of Class B that will confirm Hondou-kun and Miyamoto-kun's statements. We'll also try to find a witness that might bring light to the truth."

"Heh, you wish. No one else was there except for us," snickered Ishizaki-kun.

"Hmm... Alright. Based on everything we've heard, Class B is still at a disadvantage, but since you've claimed to have some sort of lead, we'll give you the entire Thursday until Friday at 4:00 PM where we'll finally have the trial in order to make a decision." Nii-san looked at us, the students. "You may now go."

I did what you asked for... With this, we'll win, right?



## Vol. 2: Chapter 8.1 - New Card

That night, I had to call Hirata on the phone.

*"Ayanokouji-kun? It's rare for you to call. Is everything alright?"*

"Hirata, I'll get straight to the point. Are you thinking about confronting Ryuen?"

*"What? What makes you say that?"*

"It's just a hunch. You sounded a bit different when you called us earlier... I thought you might try to do something on your own."

Even if I couldn't see him I'm sure that Hirata was wearing a surprised expression.

*"That's... Ahaha, I guess I couldn't hide it from you, huh, Ayanokouji-kun... Yeah, I am planning to talk to Ryuen-kun myself... I mean, what options do I have?"*

"Well, you're doing it precisely because you can't think of any other options, right?"

*"Yeah... Sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. I think it's the only way to save Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun."*

"I see... Then, Hirata, can you leave it to me and Horikita? The two of us will be the ones who'll confront Ryuen."

*"You and Horikita-san? Are you sure...? I mean, I can come along with you guys if you want."*

"No... I know you're worried, but it'll be fine. You can trust us on this one. We'll definitely save Ike and Yamauchi."

After a brief pause, I could hear Hirata sigh in resignation from the other end.

*"Alright... Please be careful of Ryuen-kun. Contact me if you ever need help."*

"Yeah. Thanks, Hirata. I won't let you guys down this time."

*"I never thought you did in the first place. You're doing everything you can."*

After our call, I released a small sigh of relief. Now, I just have to rope Horikita in and have her take the lead role in a small show.

When Thursday came around, I asked Horikita to come with me. We called Ryuen to the Special Building and he happily obliged.

He sure is confident. I wonder how he'll act once he's driven into a corner...

I gave Horikita the rundown of my plan and had her listen to the



recordings on my phone. They were two separate voice recordings containing everything that happened during the incident. In other words, the truth.

"What... is this? This is the plan you were talking about? How did you get a hold of this?"

Horikita instantly stiffened upon hearing everything.

"Don't worry, I'll explain the details when the time comes. Just be sure to act like everything was your plan, at least, in front of Ryuen."

"Alright..." Horikita replied while trying to fix her expression. "I'll act as instructed."

Finally, Ryuen arrived along with Yamada Albert and Ishizaki Daichi.

"Oho? It's just you two in here, or was I interrupting something? It's not civil to make out on campus just because there are no security cameras, you know?" snickered Ryuen.

"You're finally here, Ryuen-kun." Horikita addressed him, appearing unperturbed.

"Why did you call me here, Suzune? And what's Ayanokouji doing here? Is he your bodyguard?"

Horikita gave me a quick glance.

"I told you to not call me by my first name, but your brain can't even comprehend that." Horikita sighed before giving me a glance. "Anyway, I guess you can consider Ayanokouji-kun as my convenient helper. I didn't want anyone else to know about this, so I just asked someone who isn't too relevant to come with me."

"Heh..." Ryuen's smile widened. "Alright, the fun is getting stale. What are you trying to accomplish by calling me here? Are you going to kneel and beg? That's a great idea, Suzune. I want to see that strong expression of yours crumble down into tears."

"Sigh. Your cheap provocations don't mean anything Ryuen-kun. You've already lost."

"Oh...? You're saying some interesting things, aren't you, Suzune?" Ryuen squinted his eyes and observed Horikita.

She took out my phone, which I've given to her earlier, before speaking. At the same time, I also took out her phone and started video-recording.

"Hey, Ayanokouji? What's with that? I'm not a big fan of paparazzi, you know?" Ryuen questioned my actions with a smirk. I was explicitly showing them that they're being recorded right now.

"It's just insurance. Knowing how you've worked for the past few weeks, it's not bad for us to assume that you might resort to violence, right?" Horikita answered for me.



Ryuuen raised an eyebrow before widening his eyes. Not just him, even Ishizaki and Yamada froze upon hearing the voice recordings that Horikita played.

*"Oi, Kinoshita. We finished shooing the recorder guy away..."*

*"E-Eh? What are you doing he-... Augh-?!"*

*"Can we get this over with?"*

*"Agh... W-What... K-Kinoshita-chan...? What's happening...?"*

*"Don't rush it, Kinoshita. We need to do one last thing..."*

*"Fine, hurry it up..."*

*"Ugh-!"*

*"Kukuku, our guest is here..."*

*"W-Who the hell are you, man?"*

*"Why are you with Manabe-chan?"*

*"Calm down, Yamauchi Haruki. Let's wait for the rest of the gang..."*

*"The what? What the hell are you talking about? Manabe-chan, what is this?"*

*"Can you not talk to me? It's really gross..."*

*"What-?!"*

*"Ryuuen-san, we fended off the rat."*

*"Alright, hold him for me..."*

*"H-Hey! What are you guys-... Aghhh-!"*

*"That's no good, Yamauchi. Sexual assault isn't a cool thing to do. It might get you expelled, you know? Manabe, come here..."*

*"Do I really have to? I can just take my blazers off and give it to you, right?"*

*"I don't want my fingerprints on the unnecessary parts of your blazer, so shut up and do what I say-"*

"I'm sure you know what's going on by now, right?" asked Horikita.

Ryuuen's expression slowly turned dark. His smile came back before finally shuddering to a laugh.

"Hahaha... Hahahaha! I see! Amazing, Horikita Suzune! Simply amazing!" he laughed hysterically. "To think that you'd outsmart me like this... It's nothing short of incredible! Interesting, really interesting!"

"I would advise you to wipe that smile off your face. The situation's completely reversed now, isn't it?" asserted Horikita.

"Oh please. You don't have to scare me like that," shrugged Ryuuen.

"Hmph. Once I give this evidence to the school, it'll be all over for you and your classmates."

"R-Ryuuen-san, what are we gonna do?" Ishizaki asked with a panicked face.

"Hahaha, don't frighten the clueless ones, Suzune." Ryuuen's smile



didn't fade. "Once you give the evidence? Don't make me laugh. You called me here because you never planned on doing that, right? If you really wanted to rat us out, you would've done so a long time ago."

"I see. You're quite smart, aren't you?" Horikita replied as if she expected his response. "You're right. I'm not here to have you and your classmates punished."

"Heh, so? What's your goal?" he asked.

"An extra hand."

"Hohh... Elaborate." Ryuuken asked with a curious grin.

"We want to reach Class A, obviously. However, I figured that it would be quite the challenge. So, in the future, I want your help if we ever need some. That's my real goal." Horikita looked at Ryuuken with cold eyes. "You're quite the underhanded person, Ryuuken-kun. So if you plan to betray us, don't make it obvious, lest I use these recordings to blow out your class points."

Ryuuken laughed at Horikita's bold words.

"I see... Hahaha! I see now. If you use these recordings now, Class D will surely suffer, but that's irrelevant to you, who's in the higher class. So, you'd rather use me as a weapon against Class A in exchange for hiding this evidence, am I right?" he scoffed.

"Your understanding mind is convenient. My initial condition plus Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san withdrawing their accusations-- Agree to them, and we'll have a deal. So, what do you say?"

This role fits her perfectly. I couldn't have asked for a better accomplice.

"Heh, you can use the evidence more than once. I'll accept if we sign a memorandum." Ryuuken proposed with a smirk.

"Very well, I've anticipated that already. We'll sign the memorandum in secret tomorrow, after your class's withdrawal."

Ryuuken was still smiling, but he couldn't reply.

"Be thankful, Ryuuken-kun. I was considerate enough to just keep this between me and Ayanokouji-kun. I never thought you'd walk right into my trap like that. I'd suggest you try to come after Ichinose-san, Sakayanagi-san, or Katsuragi-kun before challenging our class." Horikita turned around with a cool expression as her hair swayed. "Let's go, Ayanokouji-kun. We're done here."

After recording everything, I pressed the stop button and followed Horikita.

"Wait, Suzune," called Ryuuken.

Horikita was visibly shocked, but she composed herself before turning around.

"Give me a copy of the recordings," he demanded.

"Hmph, so you want to investigate the authenticity of the



recordings? Sure, why not?" she shrugged.

"Heh..." Ryuen's smile widened as he narrowed his eyes.

"Remember, I have the recordings along with the video evidence that Ayanokouji-kun recorded just now. I trust that you fulfill your end of the bargain... for your own sake," she said, giving him a side glance. "Farewell."

At that point, Ryuen could only stare at our retreating backs. We've averted the crisis and obtained a new card on top of that. I've gained a significant understanding of how Ryuen's mind works. The only ones left are Katsuragi and Sakayanagi.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 9.1 - Just How?

I'm not someone who cowers after a loss. In contrast, I just come back stronger and fiercer. That goes double towards opponents that I find interesting. I want to have a good time. I want to have fun. I want to *crush* someone who's worth crushing.

This school was the perfect environment to exercise control over others through competition with the presence of the class hierarchy. To be honest, being demoted to Class D didn't mean anything to me. I didn't really care if I didn't graduate in Class A. I just want to have fun.

That's why I was overjoyed-- overjoyed with the fact that I had a reason to rise up. I want to crush the so-called "*leaders*" of each class and come out on top. I'll hunt them down one by one and have the greatest time of my life. Given how this school was structured, I'm sure they're worth my while.

"What now...?" Albert asked in English as he looked at me.

I have a mental list of whom I want to destroy. Horikita Suzune, the leader of Class B, tops that list right now. She thoroughly defeated me this time. I didn't expect to be one dancing on her palm. Or at least, that's what she wants me to think. Some things about what just happened didn't make sense to me.

"R-Ryuuen-san... Couldn't we have grabbed their phones to destroy the evidence by force?" asked Ishizaki.

"Nah. I don't know how, but it seems like they've managed to record everything. It'll be over if we try to do anything stupid. Do you seriously think that they didn't make copies already?"

"That's-! My bad..." Ishizaki clicked his tongue in frustration. "It seems like they hid other phones on their bodies."

"I was careful with checking Yamauchi's pockets, so even if you fucked up in checking Ike's pockets, this wouldn't have happened," I said. "Let's go. Let's relay our magnificent defeat to Manabe and the others."

I met up with everyone and told them about my encounter with Suzune.

"What?! They had recordings?!" asked Manabe.

"B-But I thought-" followed Kinoshita.

Kondou and the other guys appeared panicked as well.



"Relax, you lot. They won't use that against us if we withdraw from the case. We haven't lost anything, and we're not in trouble."

"But Ryuuen-san, you'll be forced to cooperate with them, right?" asked Ishizaki.

"That wouldn't matter. I'll make sure that our class won't get touched whenever that deal comes around."

Suzune got too overconfident with this win. She seems to be underestimating me. If our positions were switched, I would've used that evidence to thoroughly destroy her class to the point that they'll be nearly incapacitated. She doesn't treat me as a threat just because we're Class D.

But a weapon against Class A, huh? Not a bad plan, but a naive one. These three years are long, Suzune. I'll find a way to pay you or anyone who's with you back tenfold.

"Just how did they do it...?" Kondou mused.

"Heh, that doesn't matter now, does it?" I shrugged.

To begin with, I was at a disadvantage since I attacked first without knowing who my opponent is. However, I won't make that excuse.

"So Class B also has a mastermind who can match up to Ryuuen-san..." commented Ishizaki.

"I'll devour Suzune soon enough. I won't let her bask in this victory for long."

There were a lot of questionable things about earlier. First, why didn't she call out to me before the hearing started yesterday? Second, she actually sacrificed her classmates just to create a card against me. Suzune appeared cold, but she didn't give me the impression of someone who does things as I do. And third, now she's treating me like her own card.

After Suzune sent me the copies of the recordings, I repeatedly listened to them...

I compared them to how an open recording would, but they were muffled in comparison. I proceeded to record my own muffled voice by stuffing my phone inside my breast pocket before comparing the two...

They're the same.

In conclusion, these recordings were taken behind clothes. Based on their volumes, Ike and Yamauchi were much nearer than us relative to the phones.

How the hell did they hide it? No... They didn't hide it. They didn't even know it was hidden. If they hid the phone in their underwear, for example, then they should've been part of the plan. Suzune couldn't possibly hide those phones without their



awareness. But basing it on Yamauchi's reactions alone, I'm completely sure that he wasn't aware of the phone in action.

Even I can tell that these were phone-recorded voices... But if that really was the case, just how did Suzune do it?



## Vol. 2: Chapter 10.1 - Work Behind the Scenes

After exiting the building, Horikita turned around to look at me. Ah-- no... She turned around to *glare* at me. Well, I guess my day wouldn't be complete without seeing this expression of hers.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, but I refuse to wait until Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san's withdrawal. I want you to explain everything to me today," she demanded.

"Sigh... The look on your face already told me everything," I shrugged. "I don't really have a choice, do I? Let's go to my room."

Horikita was surprised by my agreement, but she immediately nodded. After we got to my room, I prepared some tea for her before finally giving Hirata a call. I put it in speaker mode so Horikita can participate when necessary.

*"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun?"*

"Ah, Hirata? We're done talking with Ryuen. Ike and Yamauchi were indeed telling the truth. After some negotiation, they agreed to withdraw from the case."

*"Oh, are you serious? That's great news!"*

"Yeah, Horikita and I are hanging out in my room right now. You don't have to worry about us. Everything turned out fine."

*"Our class will be overjoyed with this!"*

"Yeah... It was all--"

"Hirata-kun," Horikita butted in.

*"Ah, Horikita-san. I heard it went well."*

"Yes, please relay the news to everyone and tell them that everything was successful because of Ayanokouji-kun's strategy."

It seems like Horikita's pride won't allow her to take the credit. Well, I don't really mind taking the credit this time.

*"Strategy?"*

"Well, is it alright if we keep the details of the negotiation? It's fine as long as our classmates know that we won, right?"

*"Alright... But, Horikita-san, can I at least know how you two did it?"*

Hirata's concern was understandable. I suppose I could tease Horikita a little bit while responding to this.

"That's...--"

"I had Horikita admit defeat to Ryuen," I interrupted.



"What-?" Horikita glared at me.

"Admit defeat?" Meanwhile, Hirata was also quite confused.

"Yeah, I guess it's just his personality. Ryuuen was quite delighted after Horikita told him that we lost, saying that he'll let us off this time. Well, we won't tell you the details of how pathetic it was for the two of us... You know... Begging and all..."

*"That's... I'm sorry, Horikita-san. I shouldn't have asked..."*

"It's... fine... Hirata-kun..." Horikita replied while punching my arm repeatedly.

I'm quite amused by her current embarrassment. It would've been better if she had a cute, pouting face on, kinda like how Kikyou would do it.

*"Alright, I'll deliver the news to everyone. Thank you, Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun..."*

"Yeah."

After hanging up, I looked at Horikita's eyes and thought that they were moister than usual.

"How dare you..."

She continued killing me with her eyes.

"Let's just consider that as me saying *'That's what you get for being stubborn.'* and get on with it," I shrugged my shoulders.

"You better tell me everything..." she glowered.

I sighed before reaching out to my drawer.

"I'll start from the beginning then." I grabbed four items inside and showed them to Horikita.

"SD cards?" she asked.

"Yeah, two of these contain the recordings of the incident," I replied.

"But what about the other two? And whose phone did you use to record the other one? Miyamoto-kun and Hondou-kun were using their phones, too, right?"

"I didn't use two phones." I reached in for a couple more items. "I used these."

"Audio bugs... and a cassette recorder?"

"Remember when I borrowed 25,000 points from you? I used 20,000 of those to buy this small cassette recorder and the last 5,000 to buy these two bugs." Of course, the bugs only came with one SD card each so I had to buy a pair of new ones for this incident. I could've utilized the same SD cards, but I'd rather keep their uses exclusive. I have more than enough points to buy them anyway.

I grabbed my phone and transferred the 25,000 points back to Horikita.

"So you'll finally tell me about how you got Kushida-san over to



your side?" she asked after glancing at the point transfer notification.

"Yeah. To put everything briefly, I deleted the recording I got from the rooftop on the 12th of May after having her listen to it. Consequently, I revealed to her that our entire conversation has been recorded by the cassette recorder... before I tore the tape apart myself."

Horikita was visibly shaken by my words. However, she was smart enough to get what I wanted to do.

"I can't believe it... So you revealed and destroyed two cards to make her trust you... But unbeknownst to her, you actually had one more..." Horikita said as her lips trembled slightly.

"Yeah," I nodded. "You don't know the details of her past, right? She opened up and shared them all with me. Everything was saved in these two SD cards. Of course, I'll keep them to myself."

"Don't worry. I'm not interested," she replied instantly.

"I know," I responded with the same urgency.

After that short banter, Horikita decided to change the topic.

"Kushida-san aside, you used those bugs again for this incident, right?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah. On the day of the confession, I planted these two under Ike and Yamauchi's collars when I put my arms around their necks to wish them good luck." I pointed towards the left and right sides of my neck. "I retrieved the bugs after we arrived at the scene. They were unconscious so it was easy."

"I see... But why did you have to wait until today?"

"You were surprised that I predicted it right? Ryuen's last demand, I mean."

"When he demanded the recordings...? Then you-" Horikita gasped as if she figured something out.

"The sound quality of these bugs' microphones is fundamentally different from our phones'. I asked Professor-- eh-- Sotomura for help. His laptop had the best software for audio engineering so I had him teach me some things about it. Of course, I kept him in the dark about my real purpose." I only knew some basic ideas about audio engineering concepts like equalization and dynamics processing, and I had to borrow his laptop overnight to do everything.

"So that's also why you had his laptop and returned it this morning..." pondered Horikita.

"If you're also wondering why I didn't ask for Kikyuu's help this time, it's because of the involvement of these bugs. I don't want her to get suspicious of me anytime soon. In conjunction with that, I didn't want anyone else to know about the existence of bugs in this



school."

I diligently searched around the campus to see if listening devices were available for purchase. I thought I'd end up with nothing, but I somehow managed to find some in stock in a very inconspicuous part of a very unpopular hardware store. Finding this rare type of cassette recorder was way easier in comparison. It only makes sense, though. The school wouldn't openly advertise the fact that tools for espionage can be bought at very affordable prices. If it weren't for my initial plan with Kikyuu, the thought of scouring around for audio bugs wouldn't have crossed my mind.

"Are you sure that Ryuuken-kun won't suspect anything?"

"He'll probably think out some things in the future, but with the help of the slight sound tinkering, I managed to send Ryuuken on a wild-goose chase in figuring out how you set up the phones, which never really happened," I continued. "And of course, Miyamoto and Hondou were the key pieces for my plan to succeed. With their actions, not only did Ryuuken think that everything was going according to his plan, but my *'failed'* attempt to record everything using Miyamoto and Hondou also embedded the idea that we were solely relying on phones."

It's just like that one movie called *Inception*. I implanted an idea inside his mind which resulted in tunnel vision. I'm sure Ryuuken will unscramble the mystery with time, but it won't really matter by then.

"This is... just..." Horikita put a hand on her head like it was aching. "I have no words. How do you even think of this stuff?"

"Well, let's just say that my mind works better in an emergency," I joked.

"Emergency? You had everything solved from the start. I can only assume that you have more backup plans if this scheme of yours ever failed, right?"

"I had five or six backup plans on standby."

"You're kidding."

"I am."

Horikita slapped my arm in irritation.

It would've been funny if I really was kidding.

"Well, jokes aside, it's nice that this didn't go public. Class A and C wouldn't have a clue of what just happened unless Ryuuken tells them anything," I said.

"They decided to hide the incident to reinforce the idea that Kinoshita-san and Manabe-san were *'scarred'* by the incident and wanted to hide it for their protection against unwanted public attention. In the end, that worked in our favor, too," added Horikita.



After taking the last sip of her tea, Horikita heaved a long sigh.

"I'm no match for you in terms of creating schemes," Horikita said with a side glance.

"Don't worry. I won't scheme against my allies."

She seemed displeased that I guessed what she was thinking.

"Well, as long as you can bring us to Class A, I'm willing to cooperate," she declared while eyeing me with suspicion.

"We're on the same side, so it would be better for us to trust each other."

"I can't bring myself to trust you fully simply because you're too cunning and unpredictable. The only upside is that you're not as obnoxious as Ryuen-kun when it comes to attitude. But still, reaching Class A is our priority. You're the person that I will rely on the most in that regard."

"Yeah, I'll definitely get you guys there as long as I feel like it."

"As long as you feel like it, huh?" Horikita narrowed her eyes.

She didn't say anything careless. Feeling like I'm about to reveal some of my inner motivations, Horikita chose to listen vigilantly.

Alright, I can give her a heads up as soon as now, then.

"You see, I don't really care about reaching Class A. I'm only helping you guys because I feel like it. I'm just testing myself against this school to see how far I can go. Of course, it would be great if we graduate as Class A. I might make it as a successful civil servant or something."

"So depending on your mood... you might leave us be?"

"Hey, I don't want to be hated by my friends so I won't do anything detrimental to the class, unlike Kouenji. But, I'll probably chill back and do the bare minimum. I don't like to stand out and I hate trouble, remember? I just want to live a fun high school life."

"Well... I guess that's fair. But we can count on you to help us for now, right?" she asked with resolve.

"Of course. That's was my plan, anyway."

"Us", huh? It's great that she's using that word in that context now. I'm sure Horikita will be in denial if I ever point it out, but at least, she's slowly developing into someone that the class can rely on.

I've known Horikita for three and a half months already. Based on my impression of her brother, Horikita might've been misunderstanding something very crucial. However, I'm not in any place to tell her that. Horikita must figure it out by herself.

Horikita and I used the remaining time to discuss the specifics of our contract with Ryuen and Class D. When the time reached seven o'clock, Horikita insisted that she's overstayed for too long and decided to bid me farewell.



"Well then, thank you for today, Ayanokouji-kun. I benefitted a lot from this incident and learned how shrewd and sly you really are." Horikita patronized me with a cool tone.

"At least compliment me properly on the way out."

After she left, I checked the Ayanokouji Group chat. Airi wants to tell us something tomorrow.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 11.1 - Cessation

The next day, I arrived early at the classroom. As usual, Mii-chan, Nishimura, Horikita, and Hirata were the only ones inside the room.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun," greeted Hirata.

"Good morning." Mii-chan greeted me as well.

"Good morning!" Nishimura followed suit.

"Good morning," I replied.

I'm not gonna lie, after a few months of being in the class's forefront, I've become more and more accustomed to my classmate's warm treatment.

After that incident with Ryuuen, I don't feel the need to hide anymore. Around this time, Sakayanagi Arisu, who's aware of my identity, would probably start to move. I don't know if her father told her about my enrolment here from the start, but given how significant our promotion was during May, it's safe to assume that I'm already on her radar.

There's also Katsuragi Kouhei. He's apparently leading a faction that's separate from Sakayanagi. At first glance, Class A seems to have some sort of internal strife, but given their consistent amount of class points, I'm inclined to suspect that it's part of some convoluted strategy. Whatever the truth is, I need to see it for myself.

"Good morning, Horikita," I greeted.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun," she replied.

"You've prepared the contract, right?" I asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "I've taken everything you've suggested into account. Ryuuen-kun agreed with the terms when I sent it to him last night. Here's the form to get the class's signatures of agreement."

"Alright, good work, Horikita."

Last night, I messaged everyone in the class group chat that we want their signatures for a contract with Class D. I told them that the contract was about them agreeing to withdraw from the case. Horikita and I judged that deceiving the class won't be detrimental in the future since the contract offered no downsides for Class B.

I slumped on my chair, laying my head on the desk. At that moment, I decided to move forward with my plans. I turned to Horikita with one thought inside my head.



*Alright, let's overtake to Class A.*

"I'll take the lead from now on. You guys support me from the back."

Horikita was surprised by my sudden announcement.

"You'll finally lead the class again? That's good news, but Class A is still an unknown variable to you. Do you have a plan?" she asked.

Horikita wasn't at all displeased that I've taken back the position after one week. Instead, she was worried if my preparations were completed.

"Hmm... Maybe I can do something about Sakayanagi Arisu, but Katsuragi Kouhei is completely foreign territory to me," I sighed. "If I do anything reckless like Ryuen and attack first, then chances are... I might get the rug pulled under me."

"That's true. So, why did you decide to come out today? You're not going to attack them now, are you?"

"Of course not, but I think there will be a good chance to do that soon. I want to rise to Class A as soon as possible and take a break," I said with a shrug.

"Take a break, huh? I don't think anyone will stop you, especially if you're the one responsible for bringing us to the top. Regardless of what it is that you're up to, I will cooperate. Do you plan to announce all of this to everyone, like before?" asked Horikita.

"Nah. They can find out for themselves. The delay would also keep the other classes from catching on too soon. It's fine if Ryuen finds out though. He'll probably think of it as a joke, anyway."

The class still thinks of me as the true leader, too. Or at least, that's what Kikyou told me. And in the end, even if Ryuen really does find out that I'm the real leader, it's not like I'm afraid of him.

"How about Hirata-kun and Kushida-san?"

"Oh, I haven't told them yet. I'll just give them a message later. It's not really a big deal."

The main reason why I had Horikita act as the class's de facto leader for a week was to solidify her position as someone who's second to me, in terms of overall capability. Well, I'd say that she's a bit lesser than Hirata because of his overwhelming social skills, but he's better suited as a supporter.

"Yaho~! Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yo, Ayanokouji!"

The classroom continued getting filled up and most of them greeted me, Horikita, or Hirata. The same thing happened after Kikyou arrived.

Class started normally but something weird happened during morning break.



"Ayanokouji, wanna have lunch with us later? Our treat," said Ike.

"Oh... You don't really have to treat me."

"What are you saying? Our butts got spared because of you, right? Take this as a thank you and apology from us," responded Yamauchi.

To be honest, I don't really know how to feel about this. However, it seems like they felt genuinely grateful, so I guess accepting their offer wouldn't be so bad.

"Well, if you two insist."

When lunchtime arrived, I ate with Yamauchi, Ike, Miyamoto, Hondou, and Professor.

"I don't know how you and Horikita-chan did it, but you guys really saved us there!" Yamauchi laughed heartily.

"Yeah! I thought there was no hope!" added Ike.

"How'd you do it, Ayanokouji?" asked Hondou.

I don't really wanna answer that particular question, but of course, it's an obvious thing to ask.

"Fufun! I assume that it was another master plan by our shadow leader," Professor said with a strange chuckle.

"I'm too lazy to get into the specifics, so let's just leave at that," I shrugged.

"Eh, no fun!" Miyamoto complained with a grin. "But it did feel nice to be in one of your plans, though. I really thought we would pull it off nicely the first time, especially when you predicted when the Class D girls would confess."

Apparently, Hondou and Miyamoto told Ike, Yamauchi, and Professor about my initial scheme. But contrary to what I told Horikita, I've actually relayed some things to Professor. It's nothing specific, but he got the gist of the situation. That's also why he wasn't too surprised about Hondou and Miyamoto's revelation.

"But man... To think that there would be someone who can match up to Ayanokouji's wits. That Ryuen sure is dangerous," commented Ike.

"But Ayanokouji came out on top in the end, right?" Yamauchi said softly while clenching his fist. "I'll punch that guy back in the face someday."

Well, I guess it's fine to have them keep their guards up.

Suddenly, Ike and Yamauchi faced me with serious expressions.

"Sorry, Ayanokouji. We caused you and the entire class a whole lotta trouble."

"Yeah, everything you said about us was right. We were acting pathetically the whole time."



"It's fine, and I didn't dismiss you guys for the sake of it. You needed to know how the whole class saw you. It would do you good to gain some self-awareness," I replied.

The two of them sincerely admitted their mistakes and apologized to me. To be honest, I'm surprised.

While I don't expect them to contribute much, I can at least hope that they'd exercise prudence to avoid trouble in the future. I wouldn't count on it, though. Immaturity and ignorance aren't the same thing.

Our lunchtime continued with Hondou and Miyamoto hounding Ike and Yamauchi about the things I said to them that day. Professor laughed strangely in the background while spouting manga references that I have little idea of.

When we got back to the classroom, Ike and Yamauchi called our classmates' attention. To everyone's surprise, the two formally apologized to the entire class. The first ones to speak up were Hirata and Kikyuu's groups. They said it's alright since everything turned out fine in the end. They most likely responded to ease the awkward atmosphere. After all, the class wasn't used to Ike and Yamauchi behaving like that. It was a good attempt to fix up their reputation by giving an apology, but the class wasn't so easily swayed.

"I'll be there shortly. Horikita and I just have to finish our business with Ryuen," I said.

"Please be careful, Kiyotaka-kun..." Airi said to me with a worried face.

"Heh, you'd rather say that to Ryuen, Airi. You know how strong Kiyotaka is." Ken crossed his arms confidently.

"Do delinquents decide things solely by competing in arm wrestling?" Haruka asked sarcastically.

"What? N-No..."

"Then there you go, idiot Kencchin," she replied with a smirk.

"Well, Kiyotaka can probably fight." Ken snapped back. "I haven't seen it tho..."

"Can you fight, Kiyotaka?" At that time, Akito spoke up and asked me.

"Yeah, I can protect myself just fine. You guys don't have to worry about us," I answered sincerely.

"Alrighty~! We'll be waiting in Airi's room. Remember, we won't start the serious talk until you come, Kiyopon!" said Haruka.

"I-It's not really anything serious..." muttered Airi.

After bidding farewell to my friends, I walked towards the



Student Council Office and saw Horikita waiting in the hallway with Ryuen.

"Oh? Your bodyguard is here, Suzune. What a way to spoil our fun."

"Seems like I'm not welcome here," I said.

"That's right. After all, you're just an insignificant character..." Ryuen narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. "Well, unless you're not."

"Who knows?" I ignored Ryuen's presence and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said the person inside.

Secretary Tachibana received us after coming in.

"You're here to sign the memorandum, correct?" asked the elder Horikita.

I took a copy from Horikita's hand and presented it to him.

"These conditions should abide by the school's rules, I assume?"

Horikita Manabu scanned each word with speed.

"Hmm... I always thought you were involved behind the scenes, but to think that you really were the cause of Class D's withdrawal along with this contract... I'm impressed, Ayanokouji," said the elder Horikita.

Well, I guess the secret is out then. Ryuen should get the message by now. He pondered over Horikita Manabu's words with a sinister smile.

That said, he sure is amazing. To think that he understood that much just by looking at the contents of our contract...

"So Ayanokouji was the one who set everything up for you, Suzune?" he asked.

Horikita refused to answer. Well, it's not like I'm trying to hide anymore, so I guess it's fine. The elder Horikita only responded with a subtle understanding grin.

"Alright, I'll approve of this contract. Since this involves your entire class, I assume you at least have eighty percent of the class's approval?" he asked.

Ryuen and I presented the signed forms to him.

"Good. As of today, this contract will be in effect. The student council will keep one signed copy." After the elder Horikita finished up the official process, he had Ryuen and his little sister leave the room.

Of course, this surprised the two. I don't know what he's after, but I don't think there's any harm in having Horikita stick around.

"Is it alright if Horikita stays?" I asked.

"Very well. You may go now, Ryuen Kakeru. Tachibana, please see him off," he ordered.



"We'll face each other again soon, Class B. I'm *really* looking to it."

Ryuuen exited the room after leaving us with ominous parting words.

"So, what's the big idea?" I asked, not using the most respectful set of words.

Secretary Tachibana gasped in horror while Horikita looked at me in surprise.

"W-What guts-- to speak like that towards the president!" yelled Secretary Tachibana.

"I have a proposal to give you." The elder Horikita replied as if he didn't mind my rather discourteous attitude. "I want you to join the student council, Ayanokouji."

The stiff expressions of both Secretary Tachibana and Horikita evolved into utter shock. Horikita wasn't the type of person who becomes jealous because I was acknowledged by her brother, but she probably wasn't expecting him to think of me *that* highly.

"P-President?! You just refused a student from Class A, didn't you...?!" said Secretary Tachibana.

I've thought about joining the student council at the start of the year but ultimately decided against it after considering the fact that I wanted to sit back and relax for the rest of my time after testing myself and reaching Class A. I won't be able to do that if I join the student council. Duties would come creeping at me.

"Thanks for the offer, but I refuse," I replied.

"And he just refuses?!" she yelped.

Secretary Tachibana is pretty good at being an expressive tsukkomi.

"Would you like to give me a reason? You're not in any clubs, are you?"

"Yes, but it's a pain so I don't want to. Why don't you recruit your sister instead."

Horikita instantly glared at me with an anxious expression.

"We don't take in underqualified students," he replied, not even sparing her a look as he fixed his glasses in place.

"Then you're saying that I'm qualified, right? Why is that? I don't think I'm that superior in comparison."

"It's because I said so."

"I still refuse."

We stared at each other for a brief second before he finally looked away in disappointment.

"Then, it's a pity," he said with a short, almost imperceptible sigh. "You may go now. Tachibana, please see them off."

Secretary Tachibana, who looked like she was holding her breath



the whole time, finally cleared her head and followed the elder Horikita's orders.

*Author's Notes:*

*Haruka says "bokencchin". Bokencchin = Idiot Kencchin*



## Vol. 2: Chapter 11.2 - Shizuku

"Why did you refuse?" Horikita asked as soon as we got out of the student council room.

"You heard my reason, right?" I replied with a question.

"But, I don't understand. You'll have a stable social standing in our year once you're elected as a member. You can also capitalize on your position whenever you or the class is in some sort of trouble," she elaborated. "The benefits outweigh the risks-"

"The *trouble* outweighs the benefits," I faced Horikita. "I refused because it's a pain. Maybe I'll consider it if there was really no other choice."

I don't have the energy to engage in this debate. Horikita Manabu already blew my cover for better or for worse, and based on Ryuuen's words, something big might happen soon. I don't really want to think about unnecessary stuff right now. And besides, I have somewhere to get to.

"I see..." she sighed in understanding. "But at least, you can focus on being Class B's leader."

"Yeah, I won't slack off on that part." I turned around and walked away. "I need to go meet up with Akito and the others. I'll see you next time, Horikita."

"Goodbye, Ayanokouji-kun. Thank you for today." Horikita thanked me with a stern but sincere expression.

I went straight to Airi's room since according to Haruka, they were hanging out while still wearing their school uniforms. Airi opened up as soon as I rang the doorbell. She was wearing an amaranth shirt and periwinkle cotton shorts. She was the only one wearing casual clothes.

"Welcome, Kiyotaka-kun," she greeted.

"Kiyopon~!"

"Oh, Kiyotaka!"

"Oi, Kiyotaka, what took you so long?"

Apparently, they passed the time by playing cards. After the Ayanokouji Group was completed, we waited for Airi's mysterious announcement in anticipation.

"U-Uhm... Please don't expect anything too surreal... It's nothing serious, I promise. I... just wanted my friends to know this part of



me..." Airi spoke anxiously.

"Ah... Sorry, if it feels like we're pressuring you, Airi. It's the first time you've acted like this so we can't help but get excited." Haruka responded with a smile.

"Don't lump me with you and Ken," Akito commented calmly with his usual cool expression.

"H-Hey!" hissed Ken.

"Well, whatever it is, don't be afraid to tell us," I said.

"Alright..." Airi grabbed something from a hanging shelf and showed us the cover. It was a young men's magazine featuring a girl that seems to be a gravure model.

"D-Do you know who this is?" Airi asked nervously.

"Hmm... I don't really read this kinda stuff, but I feel like I've seen that girl before..." mused Akito.

"Ohh..." Haruka stared intently at the cover.

"Ah-! That's Shizuka-! Oh, wait, I'm wrong, it's Shizuku! Shizuku!" yelled Ken. "Ike and his group showed me a magazine that's similar to that one last month. They were talking about this gravure idol in particular."

Airi grew increasingly tense as our friends gave their answers.

"That's you, isn't it, Airi?" I said.

She flinched in shock and skittishly looked at me.

"Eh-?!" The three yelled in surprise.

Haruka and the two guys scrutinized Airi and the girl in the magazine by giving them alternating looks. To ease their struggle, Airi slowly removed her glasses while letting her hair flow freely.

"Ahh-! It's you!"

"Ehh... It really is you..."

"Holy shit, that's wild!"

This totally feels like one of those silly moments from superhero stories where the main character finally reveals his or her true identity.

"U-Uhm, I-I just really wanted to share this with you... I thought it would be fine." Airi was fidgeting all over. It was clear that it took a lot of courage to tell us her secret.

"This is awesome, Airi! I can't believe I'm friends with an idol~!"

"It's amazing how you're the main feature in a magazine issue, too," Akito nodded with a smile.

"Ugh... I can only imagine the ogling faces of Ike or Yamauchi when they find out about this."

"K-Ken-kun... Let's not talk about them! And I'm not planning on telling anyone other than you guys, anyway..." replied Airi.

"We're happy that you've decided to share this with us, Airi. We'll keep this to ourselves if you don't want others to find out," I said.



"To be honest, if Ike and his gang weren't idiots, they would've already found it out."

Haruka leaned forward to cuddle with Airi like she usually does.

"Well, that means Airi's disguise was just too perfect!" she said. "The disconnect between your fashion choice and fashion knowledge makes sense now!"

"Amazing... To think that you're an idol, Airi..." Ken continued observing the pages with Airi's photos. "It just seemed weird how you're very cheerful-looking in these shots..."

Akito engaged with him and scanned the pages curiously.

"You're right... That's probably the main reason why the thought of Shizuku being Airi didn't cross our minds immediately," he said.

She increasingly became more anxious as they continued.

"You should've told me about your Shizuku persona much sooner. I could use some cheerfulness lessons from a professional," I joked.

If my guess is right, Airi was worried about our image of her suddenly changing for the worse. After all, revealing a completely different personality would make you seem dishonest and fake.

I preemptively turned that stigma around and prefaced her shy personality as the genuine one. It should lessen her anxiety a bit.

"Ehh?! I'm a cheerful person too, right? I can teach you!" complained Haruka.

"I want help from a professional. You're just a cheerful idiot, Haruka," I replied.

"That's true." Akito instantly agreed.

"Heh, idiot." Ken snickered with a smug grin.

"Wha-?! I'm just trying to be nice!" Haruka hugged Airi as she shed some crocodile tears. "Waah! Airi, they're bullying me!"

"K-Kiyotaka-kun, you didn't have to be so mean." Airi calmly scolded me.

Meanwhile, Haruka turned to us and stuck her tongue out.

That whole skit probably eased Airi's tense nerves.

After some more teasing and banters, Airi finally opened up and decided to share some of her stories with us. Apparently, one of the things that she desired the most was to be as jovial as her Shizuku persona, like how Kikyou is to everyone or how Haruka is to us.

"I was never really cheerful if you can even call it that. I just acted like how I thought I should... Whenever I talked to someone while looking them in the eye, I just hide how scared I am and continue smiling. During the photoshoots... I just make myself empty until everything ends," Airi sighed. "I don't think I can act like that outside of work, to be honest."

"Well, you can slowly work towards it. You're already used to how I'm acting, right? You'll be fine," Haruka said while waving her



hand.

"You can practice with us if you want. Ken's pretty good at intimidating people, so if you get used to him, you won't be afraid of anyone anymore." Akito suggested with a smile.

"Wha-?! Tch... I hate to admit it, but Akito's probably right..." Ken reluctantly agreed.

"There's nothing wrong with the current you, but if you want to change, then there's no need to rush. Take things slowly if you need to," I said.

Those words came from the bottom of my heart. Airi and I were on the same boat. I wish to change as well, but like I said, taking things slowly is probably the best approach. She wore a warm smile the whole time, but she suddenly looked very nervous.

"U-Uhm..." Airi muttered as if there was something else bothering her mind.

"Is there a problem, Airi?" I asked.

"Ah, n-nothing... It's just that... I'm really thankful to have friends like you, Kiyotaka-kun, Akito-kun, Ken-kun, and Haruka-chan..." she replied with a simper.

"I'm sure everyone's glad to be your friend, too, Airi," said Akito.

"That's right! I've never even had female friends that are as nice as you and Haruka. So I'm the one who should be really thankful." Ken grinned happily.

"I love you, Airi~!" Haruka continued snuggling up to Airi.

Friendship, huh? It's quite a pleasant thing...

"Eh-?" Airi had a surprised expression.

"What's wrong, Airi?" asked Haruka.

"A-Ah... It's nothing. I just thought I saw Kiyotaka-kun smile..." said Airi.

"Eh?! He smiled?!" Of course, Ken's overreaction was top-notch.

"Did I?" I asked with a genuinely curious expression.

"Seriously?! Isn't that, like, the first time?!" If Ken wasn't here, Haruka's exaggerated response would've taken the prize.

"Hey, even I can smile," I replied.

"Well, I can imagine you smiling bitterly, but it's hard to picture *the* Ayanokouji Kiyotaka smiling warmly like how Hirata does..." Akito pondered.

At that time, I saw Haruka absentmindedly staring at me with a slightly flushed face.

We hung out a bit more before finally saying goodbye to Airi. She seemed really happy about being able to share something with us. Well, while the other three were very vocal about themselves, I haven't really told anything about myself. Maybe I'll do that one



day.

When I got to my room, I got a call from Akito.

*"Hello, Kiyotaka?"*

*"Akito? What's up?"*

*"You've noticed it too, right?"*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"Airi, of course. It seemed like she wanted to tell us one more thing but held back in the end."*

*"Oh... That's true. I noticed that, too."*

*"I'm pretty sure Ken's the only one who didn't notice, but that's fine, I guess."*

*"What do you think about it?"*

*"Hmm... Well, we can't really force her to say anything, right?"*

*"Yeah. She'll probably tell us when the time comes."*

After my talk Akito, I called Kikyuu to check on something.

*"Kiyotaka-kun? Good evening!"*

*"Did I interrupt anything?"*

*"No, no, not at all. Is there anything you need?"*

*"I'm just curious about a gravure idol called Shizuku...?"*

Oh, I didn't consider my phrasing at all.

*"Kiyotaka-kun... Are you perhaps... into that?"*

*"My bad, I just found something out about the said person, so I got more curious. That's all."*

*"Hmmm...?"*

*"..."*

*"Well, whatever. But I know who Shizuku is. She became a well-known gravure idol right from her debut a couple of years back and was really popular afterward."*

*"I see..."*

*"She has a blog, too. You can check that if you'd like to see her activities. I'll send you the link if you want."*

*"That would help. Thanks a bunch."*

*"Wait, my computer is already open so I'll just send it to you now."*

I heard some light thuds and clattering indicating Kikyuu's movements. She was probably sitting on her bed. At that time, I also proceeded to boot up my computer. When the link arrived, I immediately opened it and saw a very personal yet professional blog site that was clearly made for a career. In the early days of the site's operation, Shizuku posted almost every day and replied to almost every reply from her fans. A lot of them were asking about her future prospects like T.V. appearances. She also amassed more than 5000 followers on Twitter. I also checked other idol blog sites for reference, but they all seemed pretty similar. However, her activities stopped after enrolling here, abiding by the "No Outside



Contact" rule of the school which was to be expected.

*"Kiyotaka-kun, I just checked her latest posts, and it seems like she stopped in early April."*

"Yeah, I saw it too."

*"Is she... a student here?"*

Oh... I didn't expect Kikyuu to arrive at that conclusion immediately.

"You think so?"

*"Well, it's not just the date of her sudden break... Look at this picture. She posted it a few days before the day of the entrance ceremony."*

Kikyuu sent me an image of Shizuku wearing a casual outfit. Nothing seemed strange about it... until I looked at the background.

*"We were given the option to move here a few weeks earlier if we wanted, right? Her room looks exactly like a typical girls' room on the upper floors."*

So that's why it looked familiar.

"You're right. Good job catching on to that."

*"Based on her data, she should be in our year, too... Kiyotaka-kun, figured out who she is, didn't you?"*

"You're overestimating me, Kikyuu. I didn't figure out her identity. She, herself, told me about it."

At this point, I had no choice but to tell her the truth.

*"Ohh, popular as always, huh? Even an idol was willing to reveal her true identity to you. Isn't that romantic?" she teased. "Well, I'm sure she also asked you to keep it a secret, so I won't pry... That said, it's quite amazing, isn't it? There's an idol in our year..."*

"Yeah... Sorry if I can't share anything significant with you."

*"It's fine, it's fine. I'm already glad that you asked me for help."*

"Thanks again."

*"You're welcome!"*

When our call ended, I continued checking out the comment section on Shizuku's more recent posts. A certain user caught my attention...

"I see... This is quite troublesome..." I muttered softly after piecing everything together.



## Vol. 2: Chapter 11.3 - Denouement

The Ayanokouji Group was doing fine with the past lessons, so I gave everyone a day off. Right now, I asked Airi if we can hang out in her room and she timidly accepted.

"Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun..." she replied, opening the door for me.

She wasn't wearing her glasses and she also had her hair down. Her typical shy demeanor made her look like the middle ground between Shizuku and the usual Airi. She stared at me with a curious expression.

"Hey," I greeted. "You must be wondering why I'm here. Don't worry, I'm not going to give you some supplementary lessons since I think you're already fine. I just wanted to talk about something."

"O-Oh... You guessed what I was thinking," she chuckled cutely.

It's currently ten in the morning, and we really didn't have much to talk about when it was just the two of us.

"Haruka knows that you've been taking pictures of yourself, but you've never really shown your quote-unquote *true face* to her, right?" I asked.

"Yes... I mean, I've also shown a lot of my pictures to you, Ken-kun, and Akito-kun, but I was in my plain get-up the whole time," she narrated. "The only one who really knew about it was you."

"When we first met, right? I didn't know who Shizuku was, though."

It was also the reason why I immediately concluded that she was Shizuku when she showed us the magazine.

After some more idle talk, I finally decided to get on with the main topic.

"I checked your blog site last night. It seems like you stopped posting when school started," I said.

"E-Eh? You saw my blog...? T-That's really embarrassing..." Airi covered her face with her hands. Her body shook left and right in a very adorable manner. This was a side of Airi that only we in the Ayanokouji Group know.

"You really love your fans, don't you? You replied to almost every comment. I bet you were liking them all, too," I teased.

"Stooooop!" Airi laid face-down on her bed, burying her face on the sheets.



"I'm kidding, I'm kidding."

"Geez, Kiyotaka-kun, you're so mean sometimes..." pouted Airi.  
"Even though your face doesn't change."

Cute... If Airi acted like this with her Shizuku appearance, boys would instantly swarm her much like how they would Kikyuu.

Well... I hate to ruin the nice atmosphere but...

"Although... I think some of your fans love you a little *too much*."

Airi froze. Her face contorted like she just remembered something unpleasant.

"Airi... Have you read those comments? Ah, if you have no idea of what I'm talking about, then forget I asked."

*[Do you believe in fate? I do. I believe we will be together forever.]*

*[I can always feel you close to me.]*

*[You were even cuter today, weren't you?]*

*[Did you notice when our eyes met? I noticed.]*

Delusional was the first word that came into mind, but I felt like there's something more to this superfan.

"U-Uhm..." Airi's eyes darted around the room.

"Last night, you were trying to tell us one more thing, right? I thought it was related to this."

"Eh? You noticed?" she asked in surprise.

"Akito and Haruka did, too, apparently. We were worried."

Airi bit her lip with an apologetic expression.

"It would've been fine if those comments were limited online, but the guy sounded like he knew who you were. Do you know him? Is he a student in this school?" I asked.

I didn't really have to be so forward, but Airi won't say anything if I don't question her. And unless I was wrong about how close we were as friends, she'll tell me upfront if she really wanted me to stop asking.

"N-No... He's not..."

It looks like Airi isn't too comfortable talking about this, sure enough.

"He's not a student? Then he must be an employee..."

At least I've confirmed that this guy does exist inside the campus.

"Um, Kiyotaka-kun, is it alright if we stop talking about this? I promise to tell you guys everything after I confront the problem myself."

Well, that was fast. Unfortunately, I didn't get enough information, but I don't want to hurt my relationship with Airi by asking any further.

"I see... I understand, Airi. Sorry for being pushy."

"I-It's fine. I'm surprised, though. So you have an assertive side sometimes, Kiyotaka-kun."



"I guess..." I replied.

Airi chuckled in response.

"If I told Haruka-chan, she'd surely get the authorities involved. Ken-kun and Akito-kun would most likely try to reprimand the person themselves... Kiyotaka-kun, meanwhile-- to be honest, I don't really know what you would do."

"Probably the same as Ken and Akito."

"You'd confront him as well? I just can't imagine you in a fight with someone, though." Airi mused curiously.

"Well, a lot of our classmates say that I look harmless. I don't know if that's a compliment, though."

"Yeah," she giggled.

Despite the cold atmosphere earlier, the two of us slowly managed to bounce back.

After talking some more chats, the time finally hit 11 o'clock.

"I have lunch plans with Hirata and the others. Wanna come along?"

"Eh-? That's with Karuizawa-san and the rest of her group, right? I-I'm good. I won't fit around them, that's for sure..." she declined. "Have a nice lunch, Kiyotaka-kun."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. I can even ask Haruka-chan out if she's available." Airi saw me off with a smile.

The most important piece is "when"... I have no idea when Airi will make her move. Because I confronted her today (on top of telling her that Akito and Haruka also knew about this), Airi's sense of urgency will kick in. There's a very high chance for her to do it today.

At Keyaki Mall, Karuizawa and I were the ones who ordered the food. Apparently, her friends wanted to interrogate Hirata about their relationship's progress.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you think I got the orders right?" she asked while staring at the tray she was carrying.

After scanning the receipt and looking over our food trays, I concluded that we got everything.

"Yeah, I think so. Let's head back," I replied with a nod.

The conversation was getting heated when we arrived.

"Eh?! You haven't kissed yet?!"

"That's seriously so shocking!"

"I thought Karuizawa-san was just hiding it!"

"Ah-haha... We don't plan to go that far just yet..." Hirata was smiling amicably as he denies their fantasies.



"How pure~!"

I thought this was going to continue, but their attention shifted back to me the moment I sat down.

"So, Ayanokouji-kun, are you going out with Kushida-san or what?" asked Ichihashi.

"Ooh! That's what I wanna know, too!"

"They're, like, super close. It's impossible for them to not be a thing."

The girls, even Karuizawa, enjoyed this topic a lot. They were all smirking in delight. Hirata kept smiling as if he understands my pain.

"We're just friends," I replied.

"Ehh?"

"Is that really true~?"

"*The* Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and *the* Kushida Kikyuu of Class B? You're like a match made in heaven, though."

The girls voiced out their bummed reactions.

"Like, you can all sound disappointed, but you're actually happy that Ayanokouji-kun isn't taken by anyone yet, right?" Karuizawa commented with a shrug.

"K-Karuizawa-san!"

"You didn't have to say that!"

They immediately got flustered after hearing Karuizawa's words. This particular exchange isn't really new to me anymore. We've been hanging out a lot since the start of school.

After lunchtime, Hirata was supposed to accompany Karuizawa and her friends to go shopping. Summer vacation is drawing near, after all.

I went back to the dorms and spent some time by myself. Well, all I really did was the usual; fiddling with my phone, chatting with friends, and all that.

After feeling like the food in my stomach has been properly digested, I proceeded to do some light exercise in my room, near the window.

It was almost three when I suddenly saw someone who looked like Airi exit the building. I was all the way up on the fourth floor so it was pretty hard to see.

I called Airi on the phone, just to be sure. But while the person I was looking at wasn't picking it up, neither was Airi. That person seems like she's headed towards the entertainment district where Keyaki Mall and most shops are located.

I called the dormitory management office for confirmation...

She's out.

"Thank you very much."



As soon as I ended the call, I immediately put on some clothes and got to the elevator. She'll get far, but I can probably catch up as long as I know the general direction of where she's heading to.

When I got down to the lobby, I saw a girl who was just getting back from her own business. It was Karuizawa Kei.

"Ayanokouji-kun? Wai- Hey!"

I didn't have time to talk so I just ran straight past her. Karuizawa was probably surprised.

It wasn't long until I finally closed the distance from the girl I saw. As expected, it was Airi. She was at the back entrance of a camera store and repair shop called SIVCamera.

"Please don't contact me anymore!"

In front of her was a man who looked like he was in his thirties. So he was the one who wrote all of those comments?

"Why would you say something like that? You're my treasure... Ever since I saw you in a magazine, I've loved you. Meeting you again here, I felt like it was destiny. I love you... I can't stop feeling this way about you!"

"Stop... Please, stop it!" Sakura shouted. She took something out of her bag. Letters. It looked like there were more than a hundred letters...

"How do you know my room number? Why do you keep sending these?"

"Why? Of course, I would know your room number and send you letters. It's because our hearts are connected."

If I try to match the number of our days on campus, the number of those handwritten letters, and the date of the first creepy comment, it's easy to see that Sakura has actually been suffering ever since school started. And today, she finally found the courage to confront this man.

"Please stop it. It's bothering me!"

She tossed the bundle of letters to the floor, rejecting the man's unrequited love.

"Why... Why would you do something like that? Even after I wrote out my feelings to you!"

"D-Don't come any closer!"

The man closed the distance between him and Airi. The intensity of his pace made it look like he was about to attack. Latching onto Sakura's arm, he shoved her up against the store's backdoor.

"Hya-!"

"I'll show you just how much I love you now... If I do that, then you'll understand, Sakura."

"No, let me go!"

I started taking photos for evidence. I wanted to wait until



something decisive happens, but I felt a presence approach our location.

"Why did she have to follow me all the way here...?" I muttered. Well, whatever. These photos are probably more than enough. I approached the two of them quickly and kicked the guy's side. "Gah-?!"

The startled Airi fell in surprise. I yanked the coughing man's body by the neck and kned him in the stomach.

"Ack-!"

"Karuizawa, you're there, aren't you? Can you take care of her?" I asked without looking in her direction.

"A-Ah- Eh... Uhh, okay..." Karuizawa probably intended to hide, but she's better off keeping Sakura company while I take care of this guy.

I released a left hook to his face.

"Ugh-!"

Ah-- I think I overdid it. A couple of teeth fell out... Well, I guess that much was fine.

I grabbed the half-awake man closely and showed him my phone.

"I caught you red-handed, old man. You were assaulting an underaged girl inside the school campus. And it's the high school run by the national government, too. Your only option is to get out of this place for good, or your life will end as soon as tomorrow."

"W-W-W-Wha-?"

I leaned in slightly, whispering my next words.

"I can also end it right here and now if you want."

His expression was full of fear. His face was swollen and he was shivering all over.

"I-I-I-I-I u-u-u-unders-s-s-stand... I-I'll never-..."

I punched him in the face one last time as I let go.

"Agh-!" he cried as he fell to the ground.

"Scram."

The man ran back inside quickly despite his pitiful condition.

"Are you okay, Airi?"

I slowly approached the two dumbfounded girls.

"Kiyotaka...-kun..."

"You did well," I said.

"I guess I'm no good, after all... I couldn't do anything by myself in the end," Airi smiled bitterly.

"That's not true. You summoned up the courage to confront that man even if you were afraid."

I found her actions quite admirable.

"Wait, wait, wait. Excuse me? I'm here, too, you know?" Karuizawa, who was standing beside Airi, voiced her displeasure.



"Can you at least explain to me what happened here?"

"K-Karuizawa-san... Uhm..."

"As you saw earlier, I beat up the guy who assaulted Airi."

Karuizawa cocked her head and eyed Airi. She probably understood how shy she was so she didn't continue asking questions.

"Well, whatever."

"Why did you follow me here in the first place?" I asked.

"T-That's because I never saw you like that! You looked like you were running for your life!"

I guess her curiosity was to be expected.

"Stop exaggerating things..."

When Airi got back to her feet, she suggested that we go back to the dorms. The three of us were definitely a weird combination, but it's the result of this silly coincidence.

After we got to the lobby, Haruka instantly ran to Airi, hugging her.

"Airi!"

"Haruka-chan..."

I decided to contact Haruka earlier and she worriedly received her best friend upon return.

"Are you alright? You're not hurt, are you?"

"Yes... I'm okay, thanks to Kiyotaka-kun."

"Kiyopon, what happened?" she asked.

"We can explain everything, but not here. You're making a fuss in the lobby."

"Ah-"

"Hasebe-san, can you two go ahead? There's actually something that I need to talk about with Ayanokouji-kun."

"Eh...?"

"In private," she added.

"It's fine. Go ahead and call the others to your room. I'll follow right behind," I reassured them.

"Okay..."

When they left, Karuizawa and I proceeded towards a rest area on the way to the school building.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"A few things," she replied. "You were quite merciless earlier."

"My friend was in danger. I should at least do that much." Ken and Akito would probably do the same.

"Hehh... So you'd do the same for Hasebe-san? What about Kushida-san?"

"Of course, it's just the same for them. Well, it's better to hope



that nothing happens to them in the first place."

"But what about-..."

"What about...?"

"U-Uh, what about your class leadership? I heard about it from Hirata-kun. Since you haven't told the class, I refrained from telling any of the girls yet," she asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"That's a sharp turn if I've ever seen one."

"Oh, shut it."

"Well anyway, it's true that I've taken the lead again. After that incident with Ryuuen, I realized that I was being pretty paranoid. There's really no need to hide in the shadows or anything like that."

"Paranoid? Like you were overestimating your enemies?"

"No, and I'm not underestimating them now, either. It's just that my initial methods are unneeded. It's just a school, after all."

If I was afraid of standing out, then I'd push my hiding strategy for as long as I can. Since that's not the case, getting attention for myself was an inevitable side-effect that I'd need to live with.

"Ohh... I don't really understand, but hearing you say that would really put everyone at ease."

"Nah, it's fine if the class doesn't find out right now. That's the same for Chabashira-sensei."

Teachers were another variable that I need to be wary of.

"I get it, I get it. For now, I'll continue doing my part in controlling the girls. I could also give you some information if you want, but you already have Kushida-san for that, right? Her social network is quite bigger than mine, especially with boys."

"Yeah, I'll be counting on you."

I stood up since I thought the conversation was over, but Karuizawa continued to sit while staring at me.

"What?"

"You seem different."

"Different?"

"Uh... How do I say this... When I first got to talk to you with Hirata-kun, you had a really warm and friendly vibe, especially with your choice of words. That's despite your gloominess already." She pointed at me before continuing. "But recently, I felt like your words are getting sharper and sharper. You're giving me a colder vibe than usual..."

"Is that so...?"

"I mean, Sakura-san was probably overwhelmed by fear at that time, but as a spectator, I noticed how emotionless you were at using violence." As someone who experience violence, Karuizawa had the grounds to say that. "It's like you're used to it-- fighting, I mean. Were you a delinquent in the past, Ayanokouji-kun?"



"Hmm... I won't say that, but I've been in fights."

"You're from America, right? The fights there must've been intense," she said, looking like a curious kid.

"It's not that bad." I turned around and started walking back to the dorms. "Let's head back. Or are you staying here?"

"We're such close friends, but I still feel like I know nothing about you," she sighed while shaking her head. "Hey, wait-! I'll come!"

I ended the conversation briefly as to not dwell on the topic of pasts any longer. I managed to save Airi but Karuizawa Kei also saw a strange side of me.

*Author's Notes:*

*I didn't use the GPS thingy.*

*Here are the details about Airi's gravure idol career from Volume 3.*



## SS.8 - Lilac in the Shadows

A petite girl with short silver hair sat on her desk inside the classroom of Class 1-A. She was accompanied by three other students-- one girl, and two boys. She was intimately holding her hat with a walking cane on her lap.

"You really won't come?"

"Fufu~. Will you miss me that much, Masumi-san?"

"Not really."

"I'll do what I can while we're there, princess," said the handsome boy.

"I'll be counting on you."

"I wonder if it's alright to give Class B a push. Katsuragi's hold would definitely fall if we make the biggest threat even more dangerous."

"Fufufu~. I wouldn't do that if I were you, Hashimoto-kun."

"Is there a problem with that suggestion??"

"Not really. I don't think it would matter much, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"If my prediction is right, we'll become Class B after summer vacation."

"What?!"

The girl and the boy who was talking to the silver-haired girl were shocked by the sudden declaration. Even the silent boy turned to her in surprise.

"Oi, oi... Are you serious? Look, even Kitou is doubling-checking his hearing."

"Katsuragi-kun told us that Class B's advancement was a fluke, right? You didn't even refute him. So you don't think it was the case at all?"

"The idea of it being a fluke isn't really incorrect, but it's not entirely right, either. Katsuragi-kun isn't underestimating Class B at all, nor is he keeping his guard down. But as things stand, his conservative strategies will be our downfall-- at least, for now."

"I've had my eyes on Class B for a while now. Apart from Hirata and a girl called Horikita, there really isn't anyone to look out for. There's Kushida Kikyuu, who's very popular, and Ayanokouji, who swims really fast, but even with the four of them combined with a handful of smart students in their class, they're really not much of a



threat."

"Fufu~... You'll understand what I mean soon, Hashimoto-kun," the girl smiled.

"Wait, wait... Alright, let's say that Class B really is that much of a threat. Are you not gonna do anything about it?"

"I can't really do much, can I? My condition prevents me from attending the upcoming trip, and Katsuragi-kun will surely butt heads with me whenever I come up with plans. It's better to have him lead the class and take the full brunt of Class B's attack."

"I didn't think Class B was the aggressive type."

"They're not, Masumi-san. They're probably as friendly as Ichinose-san's Class C. Class D's Ryuen-kun is still the most aggressive, in my opinion. However, we're still Class A. In the end, we're everyone's targets. I don't doubt Katsuragi-kun's abilities, but there really isn't much that he can do."

"Aren't you just overestimating Class B?"

"Fufufu~! You might be right, Masumi-san. I might as well be. But I can't help it... I just... can't help it." The silver-haired girl chuckled excitedly. "I really want them to be that formidable... That way, it won't be a boring feat to trounce them completely."

The three calmed down when she said those words.

"Is it alright if I give Class D a hand in stirring up chaos then?"

"You can do as you please."

*"Class B isn't formidable-- far from it. He's the one responsible for their rise, and I'm excited to challenge him and him alone," she thought.*



## Vol. 2: Chapter 12.1 - Eyes on the Future

"What are you thinking about, Kiyotaka-kun?"

Kikyou was currently seating cross-legged on the bed while hugging a pillow. She noticed how I was staring blankly out of my closed window into the slightly brighter evening.

"Nothing. I just feel like something big will happen soon."

"Like the final exam?"

"Well, there's that, but it's been more than three months, right? Isn't it weird that the so-called *"special exams"* aren't happening yet?"

"You think something will be different with the final exam?"

"That's right... But there's also the summer island vacation."

"Wait, that?" Kikyou tilted her head in skepticism.

I'm not really in the mood to lay out the scattered clues. Who knows? Maybe I'm just overthinking things, in the end.

"Dunno. I might be thinking too deeply into stuff. It just seemed like the idea of a paradise vacation is another one of the school's baits."

"Just like the monthly allowance, huh?" Kikyou shifted her sitting position into a seiza-like kneel. "Well, if it's gonna be a competition between classes, wouldn't it be our chance to beat Class A?"

"Maybe."

"And with you in our class, we won't have anything to worry about!" Kikyou smiled cutely.

"I can't fight against entire classes alone. Don't slack off."

Kikyou continued chuckling like she won't be part of the battle.

Honestly, I'd choose to sit back and just watch Horikita or Hirata battle it out with the other classes. However, they probably won't do as well, objectively speaking. Horikita is in the right mindset but lacks the influence that Hirata has. Meanwhile, Hirata is susceptible to getting tunneled into thinking about his own group exclusively. Other classes could easily attack us if that were to be the case. It would've been different if the two of them are hand-in-hand in terms of cooperation, but that be hard for Horikita as she is now.

"You know I don't like trouble, right?"

"Uh-huh?"

"That's why I want us to rise up to Class A as soon as possible. I'm just trying to see if I can do it. After we reach Class A, it'll be up to you and the class to maintain our position."



"K-Kiyotaka-kun, don't pressure us like that."

"Nah, I believe you guys can do it."

"With pieces of baggage like Yamauchi-kun, it'll be extremely hard."

"Well... that's true. We've got inactive classmates like Kouenji, too."

Kikyuu giggled as she hugged the pillow tightly.

"Ehehe... Now that we're talking about this, it does feel like the normal high school life that we're all used to is about to get flipped over on us once again."

I'm enjoying my so-called "*normal high school life*". Since getting to Class A could cement that, then testing myself was a good primary goal. If the school wants to do something to test us as a class, then the foundations I've laid down should be more than enough to yield considerable results.

*Author's Notes:*

*This is the Epilogue of Volume 2.*



## SS.9 - Ichinose Honami: Leader

Are the two of us friends? I'd like to think that we're friends. But isn't it presumptuous of me to think that, though?

Ahh~! It's not like me to get anxious about something as simple as being friends with another person. But somehow, it's different with him.

He was mysterious and unreadable-- he was enigmatic.

For some strange reason, he gave me the impression of someone who's incredibly smart... and dangerous. That's how mystifying he was for me. We've been acquainted for so long now. It's not a stretch to call us close. But up to this day, I still look at him as someone equivocal.

"You really are oblivious to your own social standing, Ichinose."

As I was worrying about some unnecessary things, the voice of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun rang inside my ears.

"Eh?"

"Well, you're probably the most popular girl in our year, but you don't seem to be aware of that at all," Ayanokouji-kun uttered those words as he ate his sandwich. "You even hang out with someone like me."

"Haha, then aren't you the same as me? Like Kozue-chan said before, you're too unaware of how popular you are, especially with the girls," I laughed wryly. "And about me hanging out with you-- that's not something to be concerned about. I can hang out with any of my friends."

And to be honest, I thought I'm the one who should be worrying about that. After all, I'm the one who's in the lower class.

"Do you have friends from Class A and D, Ichinose?" he asked.

"Yeah, I do. I think it's great to have connections from other classes. It makes cooperation way easier," I shrugged. "I don't get along with Ryuen-kun, though."

"Well, after what happened to our classes, it's clear that he's quite the hostile guy."

"That's true. We just have to keep our guards up against him, huh?" I took a sip from my canned juice before asking. "About that incident with your classmates and Class D, how did Horikita-san manage to put out the fire perfectly. She's Class B's leader, right?"

I heard of the rough details from Kushida-san, but I'm kind of



curious about the specifics. Unlike us, Class B didn't suffer any sort of damage. Horikita-san's leadership must've been superb. Either that, or she saw through Ryuen-kun's plan.

"Hmm..." Ayanokouji-kun seemed to be pondering about something. "Well, I guess it's better for me to be honest with you on this, huh? It's not like I treat Class C as an enemy, anyway."

"Hm? What do you mean?" I asked, slightly tilting my head to the side.

"Well, Horikita was just acting on my orders. I'm the one who's leading the class as of now." Ayanokouji-kun spoke nonchalantly.

Eh?

"Wait, did I hear it right? You're the actual leader of Class B?"

"Yeah." Ayanokouji-kun looked away and bit on his sandwich. "Before I knew it, that's how the class treated me. I tried to verify it with everyone, and apparently, they all agreed, apart from Kouenji, who didn't really participate in class discussions."

I thought Horikita-san was their leader. At least, I'm sure that was the case a couple of weeks back.

"That's so cool! Now you really can't call yourself a '*nobody*'!" Before I knew it, I got all excited on my own.

"Guess so."

"Are you actually someone super amazing, Ayanokouji-kun? Should I ask to shake your hand?" I asked jokingly.

"I can't compare to the Ichinose Honami of Class C, still."

Ayanokouji-kun and I just continued putting each other on a pedestal with our jokes.

"So, what did you do? You beat Ryuen-kun, right?"

"I can't really say that I '*beat*' him. Ryuen was just trying to stir some chaos. His methods were quite reckless, and he didn't really know who his enemies were. That was probably the reason why we managed to dodge any sort of crisis."

"Hehh... I see. That's still amazing, though. I wish I could've handled those problems as flawlessly as you did."

"Flawlessly is a big word, and you kind of helped me by confirming my suspicion way back when Ryuen's target was Ken. I'm sure we'd be in trouble while your class would've been fine if Ryuen's order of attack was reversed." Ayanokouji-kun explained seamlessly.

"Ahaha, you think so?"

"Yeah." Ayanokouji-kun finished his sandwich and stood up from his chair.

"Are you going to return?" I asked.

"Are you staying here? You can't run away forever, you know?"

"Yikes, you're right. I felt like time went by so fast. It was really



fun hanging out with a fellow runaway," I chuckled.

Ayanokouji-kun and I met up coincidentally because of the same reason. Both of us wanted to be alone. He'd probably be somewhere more secluded if I didn't call out to him earlier, but now we're together again. This kind of thing has been common for the two of us lately. It's kind of refreshing, to be honest.

Anyway, that just goes to show how popular he is inside his class. Now, his position as their leader makes a lot of sense.

I feel strangely calm at the moment. Finding out that Ayanokouji-kun is the leader of Class B surely changed my image of him. However, I don't particularly feel skeptical or cautious of his behavior. He didn't really change how he talks or change how he presents himself to me. He's the same old Ayanokouji Kiyotaka that I've been friends with for the past three and a half months.

And now, I know that this boy beside me is a fellow leader with the same goal of guiding his class to the top. He may be our rival, but I hope he doesn't become our *enemy*.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, a cold shiver ran down my spine.



## SS.10 - Ayanokouji Kiyotaka Fans (3)

### Group Chat Name: A.K. Fans

Total Members: 13

Males: 0

Females: 13

### Class Distribution:

A: 0

B: 13

C: 0

D: 0

### Names of Members:

- 2M1I1 (Admin)
- A2S
- DeKai
- Sawako
- Memento
- Nika0
- Ui-tan
- T0ka
- Yuu-chan
- Kabe-don (*New*)
- Shizu (*New*)
- Doragon (*New*)
- Haato (*New*)

### Chatroom:

[Welcome! (づー 3ー)づ] (2M1I1)

[Aren't we growing a little too fast?] (Sawako)

[No way!]

[I'd say that there's too few of us.] (Doragon)

[Ayanokouji-kun deserves more fans! (๑♡△♡๑)] (Memento)

[To think that we're all classmates here...] (Shizu)

[Isn't it great?]

[All of us agree that Ayanokouji-kun is the coolest!] (2M1I1)



[Do any of you know if he has a girlfriend already?] (Kabe-don)

[Kushida-san?] (Ui-tan)

[I'm pretty sure that's not the case, though.] (Kabe-don)

[I've asked him in the past.]

[He denied it, and he didn't seem like he lied.] (Nika0)

[Confessing to him sounds pretty scary.] (Sawako)

[You told us you'd confess to him last time. (ღωღ)] (Memento)

[I backed out! I'd surely be rejected!]

[If he's not even interested in a cute girl like Kushida-san or his beautiful seatmate, Horikita-san, then my chances are slim! ♡(ε □ □ ∷)] (Sawako)

[I'm sure he's interested in some way.] (DeKai)

[I caught him staring at Karuizawa-san one time.] (A2S)

[EEhh?! Wait, are you serious?!] (Ui-tan)

[That's quite the reaction, Ui-tan.] (2M1I1)

[Ah, well...]

[Doesn't Karuizawa-san have a boyfriend already?]

[If Ayanokouji-kun likes her too, then isn't that too unfair for the others?] (Ui-tan)

[Well, I always find myself staring at Ayanokouji-kun.]

[Maybe I was just mistaken about the person he was absentmindedly looking at.] (A2S)

[I think Ayanokouji-kun is just too busy for a relationship.]

[He's still the class leader like Horikita-san, and he's also a tutor.] (Haato)

[Being a tutor is hard, I'm sure.] (Yuu)

[That's true...] (T0ka)

[He's a genius, though! Ayanokouji-kun might find it easy.] (Kabe-don)

[I'm sure he's a great teacher, too.] (Shizu)

[All of us in here are pretty envious of both Sakura-san and Hasebe-san.] (T0ka)

[They're lucky, that's for sure. ♡□ . □♡] (Kabe-don)

[I wonder if there's a chance for a change of study group assignment?] (DeKai)

[No!] (Shizu)

[What?] (Kabe-don)

[What?] (Yuu-chan)

[What?] (2M1I1)

[What?] (Haato)

[What?] (DeKai)

[What?] (Nika0)

[What?] (Sawako)

[What?] (Memento)



[What?] (Doragon)

[What?] (Ui-tan)

[What?] (T0ka)

[What?] (A2S)

[Aaaah... What I meant was... I'm happy with my group assignment. But I'm not explicitly saying that I'm in Ayanokouji-kun's group! I won't say that I am, but I won't say that I'm not.] (Shizu)

[That's still pretty suspicious, but okay.]

[We're not really into finding out each other's real identity, anyway. (｡◕‿◕｡)] (A2S)

### **Additional Group Chat Settings:**

- Screenshots: Disabled
- Clear Cycle: Every 24 Hours, 6:00 AM

### **Membership Settings:**

- Male: Invite-only
- Female: Visible to all



## Vol. 3: Chapter 1.1 - On the Way to Luxury

I woke at 4:30 in the morning to get ready. I met up with the Ayanokouji Group-- Airi, Haruka, Akito, and Ken.

"Good morning..." Akito greeted us with a sleepy expression.

"Are you not a morning person, Miyacchi?" Haruka asked with a smirk.

"I don't know... I just didn't get enough sleep, I think," answered Akito.

After all of us got reunited with everyone in the class, Chabashira-sensei started a roll call. I immediately noticed that one of us was missing. Just before Chabashira-sensei could utter her name, Horikita finally arrived with her things. She wasn't really late, but she was still the last one to arrive in our class.

"Good morning, Horikita," I greeted. "It's strange for us to be ahead of you."

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. You don't have to mind it. A minor setback happened when I was arranging my things-- nothing to worry about," she replied.

"I see..."

I wasn't really worried or anything.

"Alright, head inside the bus for your class. We'll have to be in Tokyo Bay as soon as possible." Chabashira-sensei instructed.

The students of Class B loaded the bus. I sat three seats forward from the ones at the very back. Akito and Ken sat together behind me while Haruka and Airi sat together across them.

"Can I take this seat?" A cute girl with brown hair asked. It was my classmate and friend, Matsushita Chiaki.

"Sure, go ahead," I replied.

"Alright." Her gentle smile never fails to mesmerize me. It's one of the main reasons why a lot of the boys, even the ones outside of Class B, have a huge crush on her.

"Wow, you're pretty shrewd, Chiaki." The head of Satou poked out from the seat in front of us.

"Ohh, this is quite the pair." Beside her was Shinohara.

"You two went ahead and sat together. I had no choice but to find



another seat, right?" shrugged Matsushita.

To her classmates' surprise, Karuizawa chose to sit with one of her female friends. Her group was a little bit to our front, with a lot of the girls in our class surrounding them.

Meanwhile, I saw Hirata talking with Yukimura, who became his seatmate.

"Alright, everyone. All classes are ready. The buses will depart now. We're expected to reach our destination a little after 6:00 AM. For now, just buckle up and relax during the ride," Chabashira announced before sitting at the front-most area.

I initially planned to take a nap during this hour-long journey, but engaging in conversations with my classmates was pretty fun, especially with my seatmate.

"We did really well in the finals, didn't we? Too bad we couldn't do your previous strategy with the old test questions," she said.

"Yeah... Sensei called me out and told me that she knew about it. Even if I wasn't reprimanded, we might get in trouble if I do it again," I replied.

"Everyone still worked hard, though. Sudou-kun came in last, as usual, but he didn't do as bad as we predicted him to. You're quite the tutor, Ayanokouji-kun," she chuckled.

"Nah, I might've just found it a bit easier to teach him because he's my friend." Ken was audibly having fun with Akito with their own conversation so I doubt he can hear my considerably embarrassing words.

"I still haven't forgiven you for making me one of the tutors, you know?" she smiled.

"You'll have to suffer with me, as someone who dislikes trouble, too," I joked.

"Hmph, I originally planned to live a laid-back high school life, you know? I didn't have the immediate expectations of my parents this time, after all."

Her calm and mature demeanor immediately tells me that she's just poking fun at me. I guess treating her words like a joke and trying to follow up on them was the right choice.

"The S-System rained on your parade, huh?"

"It certainly did. But considering how we're Class B now, I guess working hard for the class isn't a bad thing to do." Matsushita's expression turned somber. "The whole class talked about this last night. Every one of us believes you, Ayanokouji-kun. If your hunch turns out to be right, at least we won't get caught off guard."

"We're the only class who's aware. That's a considerable advantage." I replied.

"You think we can do anything to turn the tables on Class A?" she



asked.

"I'm not sure, to be honest. If something does happen, I'm sure we'll all be starting on equal grounds. Depending on Class A's capabilities, we might not even shorten the gap."

"T-That's true... They were way ahead of us in terms of class average in the finals. Your strategy put us at the top during the midterms, but that's not the case this time."

"You're right. However, I still think we did really well even if we were a bit behind Class C. Everyone will improve if we keep this up, and you, with the other tutors, did your best to help the class."

"You should give yourself some credit, too, Ayanokouji-kun. You're not just a tutor, after all. You're back to being the class's leader, aren't you?"

"Who did you hear it from?"

"I noticed that something was odd with how Horikita-san was acting recently compared to the week when you announced to step down, so I asked both her and Hirata-kun about it. They told me that you're back on the forefront." Matsushita tilted her head before asking. "Why didn't you announce it to the class?"

"There really wasn't any need for it. It's fine if everyone found it out themselves."

"That's true. I'm glad you're back, though. Not just me-- I'm sure anyone in Class B would feel reassured if they hear about it."

"You overestimate me."

"With your flawless academic abilities and overwhelming athletic abilities, you can't blame anyone for looking up to you."

"I can't deny that."

After a very cute chuckle, Matsushita got called out by some of her friends. I closed my eyes and waited for the rest of the ride.

We arrived at 6:03 AM. The luxury liner, Speranza, left all of us in awe. It had nine decks and a rooftop, equipped with different facilities from pools to restaurants. The guys proceeded down to the third deck which housed their rooms, while the girls were expected to be on the fourth.

"It's a pleasure to become roommates with you, Ayanokouji-kun, Yukimura-kun, and Kouenji-kun," said Hirata.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Same here," Yukimura responded with a nod.

"I look forward to this wonderful luxury life as well. Please don't hesitate to admire my perfect beauty while we're at it." Kouenji announced, not even looking at Hirata.

Well then, I guess it's time to be settled.

Chabashira-sensei told us that we'd arrive a little before 8:00 AM.



We have a lot of time to familiarize this cruise ship while waiting.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 1.2 - Atop the Cruiser

A lot of the students were enjoying their time around the ship's bow.

"Shit, Ayanokouji, this is awesome!" Ike, along with Yamauchi and their other friends howled in excitement as they called me.

"It's a great scenery," I commented.

After hanging out with them for a few minutes, I reunited with my friends.

"Wow! This is so great~!" Haruka was also acting like a little kid.

"Let's take a lot of pictures, Haruka-chan," Airi asked all of us to join in for a brief photoshoot with her camera in hand.

"Isn't it great, Ken? You wouldn't have been here if you got expelled," Akito commented with a smirk.

"Heh, it's piece of cake if I get serious. And besides, I got Kiyotaka teaching me. Every exam was a hundred times easier." Ken responded with a snort.

His average in the finals was a lot lower than his midterms, but at least he passed.

"Oho~? Then why not compete with us again, Kencchin? Those private points from the midterm bet were amazing. It would've been nice to get some from you again. Right, Miyacchi~?" Haruka teased him with a smug expression.

"S-Shut up! We don't need to spend private points on this ship, anyway!" Ken was visibly shaken by that memory.

Because we were first years, we naturally had the lowest number of private points among all students. It would be hard to enjoy our time here if we're required to pay. This might've been the school's way of rewarding us.

I split up with them a few minutes after to check up on my other classmates. It seemed like everyone was having fun. Finally, I got to talk with my quote-unquote best friend, Kushida Kikyuu.

"Yo, Kikyuu," I greeted.

"Kiyotaka-kun, I was looking for you!" she replied with a smile.

"Yeah, same here. How are you finding this trip so far?" I asked.

"You sound like an employee who's trying to coax me into answering a survey," she chuckled teasingly. "I think it's incredible. I'm really glad I came to this school!"

Curse this monotone voice of mine, I guess. I'm glad I was



wearing my school uniform. It would've been bad if people mistook me as a staff or employee.

"Where are your friends?" I asked after a depressed sigh.

"They're all over the place. Kokoro-chan and the others headed back inside the cabin earlier. They said they wanted to check out some of the restaurants."

We ate our breakfast in the lounge before we were able to roam around. It's natural for many students to be curious about the different types of cuisines in the ship after having tasted them.

"I see," I replied, resting my forearms on the railings alongside her.

"Doesn't this give you a romantic vibe?" asked Kikyoku.

"I get what you mean."

Somehow, the atmosphere got a lot warmer with her question. My heart started racing...

"I'll ask this again, Kiyotaka-kun... but I'm being serious this time," Kikyoku spoke without looking at me, adorning a gentle smile. "Do you want a girlfriend?"

"Why are you asking me now?"

"I just got curious again."

"I see. Well, it would be nice if I get a girlfriend, but I'm not desperately looking for one or anything like that."

For now, I'll take back the curses I hurled towards my monotone voice. It's really good when situations like these arise because I would never come off as nervous or shaken. But then again, it's not like I was nervous or shaken, to be honest.

At this point, I turned to Kikyoku and saw that she was subtly biting her bottom lip. She was the nervous one. It all made sense after she asked her next question.

"Would you like it if I became your girlfriend then?" She turned to me and asked with a very serious expression. There was no hint of any teasing or deception this time.

"Of course, I would. You're cute, smart, and easy to get along with," I answered briefly.

Kikyoku slightly twitched after hearing my response, but I spoke before she could utter a single word of reply.

"But that's not what this is about, isn't it?"

Kikyoku smiled bitterly in defeat.

"You really do understand me, Kiyotaka-kun."

"It's unfortunate, but it is what it is. It was quite rude of you to lead me on with that question, though."

"Haha~! I was just confident that you would know where I'm getting at." Kikyoku gently struck my arm with her small and feminine fist.



"Well? Did my answer satisfy you?"

"If you didn't lie, then I *am* satisfied. At least I know that you think of me as girlfriend material." Kikyou grinned before drawing closer to me.

"No one in this world would think that Kushida Kikyou *isn't* girlfriend material," I explained. "Well, if we put aside the folks who held a grudge against you back in your middle school, then my statement would be true."

"Is that your way of making me feel better about myself?" she chuckled.

"You know how bad I am with these small talks. I don't know what I'm trying to say half the time," I joked in response.

"Well, whatever. If you do get a girlfriend, be sure to tell me, okay?" Kikyou smiled bitterly despite her obvious goal of teasing me. "Bye-bye for now, Kiyotaka-kun. I'll be going on ahead."

"Tell Nishimura and the rest that I said hi." I raised my hand and waved back slightly.

"Will do~!"

And with that, I've become all alone in this weird part of the ship near the stern.

Kikyou asked me that question to confirm my feelings for her. I was honest and admitted that I thought of her as a girl. She didn't say anything about what she thought of me, but that didn't really matter. I understood Kikyou well enough to see through her intentions.

It was virtually impossible for Kushida Kikyou to be in a relationship with someone. It wasn't really a matter of feelings or anything. For her, that concept was out of the question due to the nature of her way of living.

Being loved by everyone was her everything. If she were to enter a relationship with someone, the number of guys who would love her and follow her blindly would definitely plummet. That might also be the same for the girls if the guy she enters a relationship with is admired by a lot of females.

I understood that fact, so I wasn't really fooled by Kikyou's honey-laced framing. If I didn't, I would've immediately thought that she was confessing her feelings to me.

And with that, I tread towards the fourth deck aka the girls' area. I arrived in front of a room that was supposed to be where Horikita was staying. Since I didn't see her anywhere earlier, it wouldn't be weird if she was actually inside their room right now.

"Horikita?" And so I knocked.

Surprisingly, there was no response. According to her roommates,



they didn't feel like Horikita had any plans to go out. Is she perhaps...

Before I could complete my thought, I heard a bunch of footsteps arriving towards me from the inside of the room. The hallway was empty and silent at the moment, so it was fairly audible.

"Ayanokouji-kun?" As I expected, Horikita was inside the room. She opened the door and looked at me with a slightly confused expression.

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"I was reading a book," she replied.

"You were sleeping, weren't you?"

"Do you have any evidence?"

"Yeah, that fact that you were lying about reading a book was the evidence."

"How can you say that I was lying?" Horikita asked with a glare.

"You didn't even bother fixing your hair, specifically, your bangs. It's messed up and crooked, telling me that you were lying on your side."

Horikita reflexively fixed her bangs. Her brief but noticeable surprised reaction told me that I was right on the money.

"I guess you found me out," she pouted. "So, what of it?"

"Why were you sleeping?"

"Because I was sleepy."

"You're lying again, Horikita."

"What?"

I tried to touch her forehead with my right hand, but she slapped it away. I tried to do it again with my left hand, but she slapped it away all the same. If that's how this is going to be...

"What are you doing-?!" Her panicked reaction was justified.

I raised both of my hands which alerted Horikita. She tried to keep them away as she did half a second ago, but I moved to grab her wrists instead. I pinned her against the wall and touched her forehead with mine.

"Don't try to do something stupid like kicking me. It won't work. Just sit there for one second and let me check your temperature," I said.

This was the closest that my own face has been in contact with a girl's. I would be lying if I say that it's not making my heart beat faster. After all, Horikita was a very attractive girl. But right now, I need to complete my diagnosis.

"You have a fever," I concluded before moving my face away from hers.

"So what?"

"Don't be dumb, Horikita. We've talked about this last night. If



something happens, you'll be a vital part of the class. I can't have you getting sick on my watch," I said, looking at her straight in the eyes. "We'll head to the pharmacy and get you some medicine. I know where it is."

At this point, Horikita understood my point. She meekly nodded in agreement.

After I let go of her, the two of us realized that we were outside the room, right on the fourth deck's open hallway. When Horikita and I looked to the side, we saw our classmate, Ichihashi Ruri, and her shocked expression a few meters away from us.

"Ah, I'm sorry if I disturbed you." She ran away, not even giving us the chance to explain.

"This is going to be a pain..." Horikita held the sides of her forehead as she shook them lightly.

I think it would've been fine if it was a girl from another class, but it just had to be one of ours... It was unfortunate, to say the least.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 1.3 - Special Test

"Feeling better?" I asked.

"Yeah... I think so," replied Horikita.

"If something's wrong, tell us. There's no need to act all tough on your own."

"I apologize. I initially planned to hold out until it goes away naturally, but I guess seeking help is still the better option. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Horikita thanked me sincerely.

"Do you want to head back and rest, or are you up to get some air by the bow?" I asked.

"I think we're almost there. It would be bad if I sleep and wake up late."

"Alright, let's go then."

When Horikita and I arrived at the port side of the bow, a lot of the girls in our class immediately approached us.

"Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san! This question might be sudden but... are you two dating each other?" asked Rino.

"I saw Ayanokouji-kun visit Horikita-san in the girls' suites earlier. From what it looked like, I think they were sharing a kiss." Ichihashi, the main culprit, addressed us happily.

"Kyah~! How sneaky!"

"They didn't even wait until we got to the island!"

Horikita tugged my shirt nervously. Even she can be overwhelmed by something like this, huh? That's pretty cute of her.

The girls donned knowing smirks after seeing her like that.

"It's a misunderstanding. Horikita and I are not going out," I said.

"Hehh~? Look at how sweet you two look right now. It's alright if you reveal it to everyone, you know?" said Maezono.

"Horikita's actually sick. She wasn't letting me touch her forehead so I restrained her and used my own forehead instead. It's really a misunderstanding. Horikita, show them the receipt."

"H-Here it is..."

Horikita gave me the small plastic bag containing the remaining medicine and the proof of purchase.

"O-Oh... So Horikita-san was actually not feeling well... I hope you're okay," said Ichihashi. "And you didn't kiss, after all?"

"We didn't and we wouldn't. We're not a couple." Horikita nodded



slowly to cement our claim.

I expected their excitement to wane down, and it did. However, their smiles didn't let up. After giving back the receipt and telling Horikita to get well, they proceeded to ask about my plans.

"Well then, according to Ayanokouji-kun, no one would get angry if we invite you later, right?" Maezono leaned in close to me.

"Later?"

"At the beach house. We'd like to hang out with you. Is that alright?" she elaborated.

We were scheduled to stay in a luxurious beach house once we reached the island-- a fancy summer lodge if you will. Our luggage will be stuck there for a week. The said summer lodge should be pretty big to house all four classes at once. Or will there be some sort of rotation where some classes will stay on the ship? Well, that's an unnecessary thought right now as I was being asked a question.

"Sure, it's not like I have plans or anything," I answered.

"Great~! We'll see you later then. Bye, Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san." The five of them waved at us as they walked towards the starboard side of the ship.

"You alright?" I turned towards the silent Horikita.

"Yeah... I'm glad that the misunderstanding was cleared up." Horikita heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well, I'm sure it's been spread among all of our classmates, at least. I've been getting messages from my friends for a while now. It seems like the gossips have reached them."

"How troublesome..." Horikita shook her head.

"Yeah... It'll fix itself eventually."

At that moment, a public announcement was broadcasted all over the ship.

"Attention, students. Please assemble on the main deck. You will be able to see the island soon. This is a good time to take in some rather significant scenery."

What a strange way of wording it...

"Ayanokouji-kun," Horikita called out to me with a sharp look.

"Yeah... As expected, something strange is up."

"Class B, huh?" An unfamiliar voice could be heard from behind.

"You are?" Horikita asked the person who addressed us.

"I'm Katsuragi Kouhei of Class A. Nice to meet you." His words were polite, but his expression was stern. I noticed that most of the Class A students were behind him.

He was a tall, bald boy with a serious countenance.

"I'm Horikita Suzune of Class B."

"I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."



With a slight bow, Katsuragi walked past us and positioned himself at the front-most part of the deck, around the helicopter pad. The Class A students seemed to be happily observing the now-visible island.

After a brief second, Hirata arrived to meet us.

"Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san, you're here."

"Hirata, I'm glad you came. You've noticed it too, right?" I asked.

"Yeah... It seems like we must be ready for something big."

The ship started to pick up its speed. It was way faster than that of a normal cruise ship-- around three times as fast.

"I see... So that's how this is going to be..." I muttered.

Horikita and Hirata were focused on observing the island.

"It's not just a simple deserted island, huh?"

"A lot of strange things are very noticeable."

But why? What is the purpose of letting us see these distinct places on the island? A considerable amount of time passed as I got drowned in my own thoughts.

"We will disembark in thirty minutes. Please assemble on the deck. All students should have changed into their jerseys. Make sure to check your designated bag and your luggage, and do not forget your cellphone. Please keep all other personal items in your room. There is a possibility that you will not be able to visit the bathroom for some time, so please do so now." Another PA was heard from the speakers.

As the island drew closer and closer, the students got more and more excited. Most of us went to change in high spirits. Our class assembled on the main deck as soon as we finished changing. Everyone was looking forward to paradise which was seemingly waiting for them.

"Is everyone ready?" Hirata asked the entirety of Class B. We weren't really lined up neatly, but we were in the same general area so it was easy to distinguish which class was with whom.

"I'm so excited!"

"This is it!"

A lot of the girls were giggling in anticipation.

"We will disembark now, beginning with the students from Class A. Cellphones are prohibited on the island. Please hand your phone to your homeroom teacher as you leave."

We began lining up in an orderly fashion. A lot of the students started complaining because of the heat. With no roof above us, there was no escaping the rising sun. The disembarkment process took longer than we initially expected. No-- that's what one would normally notice, but for us who were on guard of what might come, the teachers' actions are actually quite understandable.



Hirata and Horikita approached me while watching Class C and D's inspection as they get off the ship.

"They're being strangely cautious. It's way too strict to be a normal inspection." Hirata commented with a grave expression.

"The way they check everything... They even went as far as to confiscate our phones when they didn't even do that during final exams..." mused Horikita.

"If the school intended to have us play in the ocean, then this is certainly going overboard. Have our classmates gather near. Let's keep our heads focused."

Hirata nodded as he followed my instructions. Ike and his group who were initially noisy and filled with excitement had sharp expressions while waiting on standby. It seems like our talk stuck in their minds. Meanwhile, the girls started feeling weary because of our class's sudden guarded atmosphere.

"Alright, I will now start a roll call. Please respond loudly and clearly once you hear your name." Chabashira-sensei announced with her usual poker face.

After confirming a complete attendance for the class, a tall male teacher stood on top of the prepared white platform. He was Mashima-sensei, Class A's adviser and homeroom teacher. Mashima-sensei teaches English and he was well-known for his rather stubborn disposition. His appearance might deceive a lot of people into thinking that he was the brawny type, but Mashima-sensei was actually quite intelligent. He'd even taught special courses in the past.

"I would like to say that I'm happy you've arrived safely. However, it's unfortunate that one of you was unable to participate due to illness."

A lot of the students started murmuring. Ike and Yamauchi, for instance, were whispering about how pitiful the student was. Whoever he or she was, I think trying to push themselves would've been the right move. This luxurious vacation was too much for anyone in our age to miss. Or at least, that's the opinion of the majority.

While Mashima-sensei was continuing his speech, I noticed that some adults in uniform were setting up some sort of special tent nearby. Computers and other equipment were transferred inside and laid around a long table. That was also the time when we finally noticed that something was wrong. The ominous feeling got confirmed by Mashima-sensei's subsequent words.

"Well then. We shall commence the current academic year's first special test."



## Vol. 3: Chapter 2.1 - The Doors of Purgatory

"Special Test?"

"Huh? What are they talking about?"

The murmurs got considerably louder. On the other hand, Class B turned silent-- extremely silent.

"So you were right, after all, Ayanokouji-kun..." whispered Hirata.

Last night, the class group chat of Class 1-B was very active. All 39 students were online and participating in the chat. Despite the chaos, the main topic was the suspicion about this luxurious vacation.

*(20:12) [There's a big chance that this vacation might turn out to be a special exam of some sort. Or at least a part of it will.] (Ayanokouji)*

That statement started an entire conversation about what the class might do and not do if it turned out to be true. Ike messaged me, saying that he won't cause trouble for the class. It gave me the chance to give him some advice on what he could and should do. He told me that he'd talk with Yamauchi about it. Seeing the two of them now, it is nice to see that they're not running amok.

Not a lot of arguments were made apart from the fact that we'll still probably get the chance to have fun, which I didn't disagree with. I'm sure we'll still get the vacation we deserve... But for two weeks straight? I felt like it was simply impossible for there to be no catch at all. The class agreed to be on guard.

Anyway, it seems like my influence in the class was a lot firmer than I thought. Since I was ultimately right this time, they should start relying on me with class matters much like how they'd rely on Kikyuu with their personal problems.

"The test commences now and lasts for one week, concluding on August 7th. This test will determine if you can live on a deserted island together as a group. In addition, I should warn you that this special test is both practical and realistic, designed based on real-world corporate training."

"Living on a deserted island? Does that mean we're not staying on the boat, but the island?" Some Class C and D students voiced their obvious concerns.

"You are correct. During the test, you will not be allowed to



board the ship without a suitably justifiable reason. It will be necessary for you to fend for yourselves on this island while you are here, from creating a place to sleep to preparing food to eat. Once the test starts, each class will receive two tents and two flashlights. You will be provided with one box of matches. There is no limit to the amount of sunscreen you can have. Each student will be provided with one toothbrush. As a special case, girls will be allowed to have as many feminine sanitary products as they'd like, without any restrictions. Please ask your respective homeroom teachers for those. That is all," explained Mashima-sensei.

With that, the teachers began distributing the said items.

Some students were making minor fusses, but everyone understood that there was no going back.

"This is pretty extreme. We'll have to act like island survivors."

"Two tents only? That's simply not enough..."

"What are we going to do about the food?"

"It's quite insane, to be honest..."

Mashima-sensei gave no sign that this was some kind of joke. If anything, he appeared surprised by what they've said.

"You may say that this is unbelievable, but that's because you've lived a short, superficial life. There is an actual, prominent company that holds training sessions on uninhabited islands," he said.

Some students seemed unconvinced, but Class B, in particular, remembered the things that Chabashira-sensei has said in the past when she revealed the S-System to us.

*"Nothing comes easy in this world.", "This school guarantees nothing for other students."*

Those words stuck into the minds of us, Class B students, who were supposed to be branded as the defects in our year. Our main goal after enrolling in this school was to graduate in Class A and secure our future. However, that's also why the school wants us to experience a simulation of what might come in the future. I don't know how necessary this special test on a deserted island is, but we have no choice but to comply. With how brutal some workplaces are in the Japanese work industry, this special test should be tame in comparison.

"I assume you're all thinking something like; 'What does this test mean?'. Or perhaps some of you doubt the existence of such training programs. However, students who remain at such a base level of thought are unlikely to become anyone promising in the future. What is your basis for determining this to be 'unbelievable' or 'ridiculous'? You're just students. In my opinion, you're all equally worthless. What kind of insignificant person determines that they



can criticize a leading company? That's bizarre. Were you a president in charge of one such notable business? If that's the case, then you might have some right to deny our claims. However, there shouldn't be any grounds for someone of your station to be able to do that." Mashima-sensei chided us while elaborating.

As students, we certainly thought that some parts of this so-called "*special test*" were unreasonable or unrealistic. But as Mashima-sensei has said, there'd be no basis for whatever opposing claims we have. It's just a difference in perspective. For the teachers, who were in the workforce, our reactions would be absurd. After all, they understood the point of this special test.

"Sensei, I have one question." Finally, a student from Class A raised his hand.

Mashima-sensei turned to him without saying a word.

"We were brought here under the pretext of going on a relaxing trip. After all, this was supposed to be our summer vacation. Don't you think that springing this corporate training on us out of nowhere can be considered unfair?" he asked.

"I see. I suppose that you're not wrong about that. I understand why you would be discontented," he nodded. "However, please do not worry. It would make sense for you to have complaints if you were being forced into a harsh situation. Even though we're calling it a special test, there's no need to think about it in such unhappy terms. In the coming week, you can go swimming, or hold a barbecue party. It wouldn't be a bad time for you to occasionally have a campfire and with your friends, either. The theme of this special exam is '*freedom*', after all."

"Huh?"

"A test... An exam... But we can have barbecue parties?"

"I don't get it. I'm so confused."

This should be a pretty good time to explain whatever catch is behind those words. Even the guarded Class A and B students were visibly perplexed.

"As a major part of this test, we've decided to distribute 300 points to each class. By using your points well, you might be able to enjoy this week's special test just as you would a normal trip. We've also prepared a manual just for that purpose." Mashima-sensei raised the booklet that he received from another teacher. "This is manual lists all of the ways you can obtain points. It also explains where to get food, drinking water, and other necessities. If you wanted to have a barbecue, it explains how to prepare the equipment and ingredients. We also have numerous tools for you to be able to enjoy playing in the ocean to the fullest."

As Mashima-sensei finished his explanation, the students' grim



expressions gradually faded.

"The way we use those 300 points will be at our own discretion? Is my understanding correct, Sensei?" The leader of Class C, Ichinose Honami, asked.

"That's right. It's possible to arrange for anything using your points. Of course, you must use them in a systematic approach with a solid plan. That way, you can spend your week without any difficulties."

If we could really get through the week using the points we had, then it might end up feeling like a real summer vacation rather than a test.

"Sensei, is there a catch to this special test? In the end, it's still some sort of exam. Is there something difficult that we need to overcome?"

"No, there's nothing difficult. Not only that, this exam won't have any adverse effects on your second semester. As your grade's coordinator, I can guarantee that."

"S-Sensei... You're saying that having fun for a week is also an option?"

"That's right. You're all free to do what you want. Of course, there are some bare minimum rules that you need to abide by as a group, but there shouldn't be anything difficult about that."

It was safe to assume that Mashima-sensei was telling us the truth. This also means that this so-called "*special test*" is essentially risk-free. Even I didn't really understand the point of it, but Mashima-sensei's next words clarified everything.

"When this special test period is over, each class's remaining points will be added to their total class points. Your point totals will reflect this change once summer vacation is over."

As he spoke, a gust of wind blew across the beach and kicked up a cloud of dust.

All of us were frozen in shock. The midterms and final exams measured our academic abilities. As the original Class D, our class had a lot of students who didn't do well in academics. And of course, losing points due to misbehavior was inevitable for all classes.

"Ayanokouji-kun..." Hirata muttered my name.

When I turned around to look at him, all of my classmates in Class B were also staring at me. I simply nodded in response.

This is a different playing field. Academic doesn't matter this time.

"Each class will receive one copy of the manual. If the manual is lost, you may have another copy. However, it will consume points, so please be very careful. Also, the student who was marked absent



from this trip was from Class A. According to the rules of this special test, should any student have to leave due to illness, there will be a 30-point penalty to the class as a whole. Therefore, Class A will be starting with 270 points."

How merciless. The students of Class A were visibly upset. The other classes, including us, were shocked, too.

"You may now disperse." Mashima-sensei's final words rang inside our ears.

"Please proceed towards your respective class advisers to receive supplementary instructions." Another teacher's voice could be heard from the loudspeaker.

The classes started moving to different areas to gather up around their homeroom teachers. My classmates kept staring at me, awaiting my decision to start up our class's move.

"I will now hand out wristwatches to every one of you. You are not to take them off until the end of the test. If you remove your wristwatch without permission, you will be punished. This watch doesn't just tell time. Its sensors also check your body temperature, your pulse, and even your movements. It's equipped with a GPS. Also, in the off chance that something bad does happen, this watch comes equipped with means to notify the school. If you find yourself in an emergency, please do not hesitate to push that button."

The distributor who supplied the watches had stacked them next to Chabashira-sensei. Class B was instructed to take out the watches from the boxes and put them on.

"The test has already begun. You can ask me for any clarifications, but I will not answer any questions that might influence your points or results," said Chabashira-sensei.

I don't know how true Chabashira-sensei's words were since a watch that can monitor our very movements seems quite far-fetched. Well, since we were allowed to roam around the island, the school needs to know about our conditions and whereabouts. After all, installing cameras on this island like how they did in school should be pretty difficult. The teachers won't be able to watch us with their eyes alone.

"Sensei, I understand that we're going to spend a week on this island, but is it even possible to get by without using any points?" asked Hirata.

I'm sure that question has been on the mind of every student. Good job on taking the initiative to ask that, Hirata.

"Hmm... Well, the school isn't involved in the test process at all. You must prepare your own food, water, shelter, and every other necessity to live properly. Thinking of solutions to resolve those



issues is part of the test," she replied. "For now, why don't you try familiarizing the manual so you can start coming up with plans?"

Hirata was also one of the de facto leaders of Class B. Chabashira-sensei casually handed him the said manual.

"Read the last page. The penalties are listed there. The information that you'll find there will be extremely important to this exam."

The students of Class B huddled up closely. Hirata began to read the penalties, loud enough so everyone in the class could hear him clearly.

- *Anyone deemed unable to continue the test due to significant deterioration in health or serious injury will be penalized by 30 points.*

- *In the event that a student has polluted the environment, he or she will be penalized by 20 points.*

- *In the event where students are absent during the 8 AM and 8 PM roll call, 5 points will be taken for each student absent.*

- *In the event that a student is found guilty of an act of violence towards another class, robbing another class, or causing damage to another class' property, etc., the offending student's class will immediately be disqualified, and the individual will forfeit all of his or her private points.*

Of course, every class was subject to these penalties. The fourth penalty, in particular, was especially harsh. However, it was also perfectly reasonable. It should prevent other students from engaging in harmful behavior.

The other penalties would prevent us from sleeping our time away and littering all over the place. Essentially, it was a contest of restraint.

"As the theme of the exam is '*freedom*', all of you are free to behave however you want as long as you abide by the rules and avoid the penalties. Be mindful of your health. Once ten students retire, all of your efforts will be for nothing. Retired students will not be able to return." Chabashira-sensei glanced at Horikita ever so slightly. Even I wouldn't be able to notice if I wasn't paying extra attention.

"Chabashira-sensei, can I ask another question?" Hirata raised his hand.

"Sure, go ahead."

"If, for example, our points are down to nothing, what will happen if a student's class is penalized?"

"Nothing. You will remain at 0 points for the rest of the exam. Mashima-sensei's words weren't jokes. This exam won't affect your class points negatively."

"Sensei, where will the roll call be held?" This time, it was



Horikita who asked a question.

"Each class will be accompanied by their respective homeroom teacher until the test is over. If you've decided where you want your base camp will be, report it. I will hold the roll call wherever the base is set up. Think about it carefully, however. You won't be able to relocate your base camp unless you have a justifiable reason to do so. There will be no exceptions."

So Chabashira-sensei will act as our supervisor, huh?

"Sensei, since no one has mentioned it yet, where's the toilet?" asked Ike.

The girls were probably thankful to him. That question should've been on their mind this whole time, too.

"Oh, perfect timing. I was about to get to that."

Chabashira-sensei grabbed one of the boxes from the stacked pile. After peeling off the packing tape, she took some sort of collapsed cardboard.

"What's that...?"

"It's a basic toilet. Each class will be supplied with one. Please handle it carefully."

"We'll use that?!"

The girls looked at the simple toilet in utter horror.

"Don't worry, it comes with a single-button tent. No one would be able to see you when using it. You don't have to be wary about its build, either. These simple toilets are very well-made and can be used even during disasters," Chabashira-sensei explained.

"B-But still-- that's just a cardboard box, isn't it?!"

"That's impossible!"

Chabashira-sensei continued talking as if she didn't care about the girls' concerns.

"I'll show you how to use it, so please commit this to memory."

Chabashira-sensei began to assemble the toilet. It seemed like she was familiar with setting it up. She took out a blue vinyl bag and placed it on the cardboard. She then laid a white sheet inside of it.

"This sheet is made of water-absorbing polymer. It covers and solidifies waste. It'll suppress the smell and make the waste invisible. By repeating this process, it's possible to get around five uses with one vinyl bag. These vinyl bags and sheets will be supplied to you in unlimited amounts. You can even change them after every use if you want."

The girls had no choice but to listen silently. In the end, it won't matter whether you're a boy or a girl. If you had to use it, you will use it. However, I understand that this is nowhere near the ideal toilet that we'd be willing to use.

"T-There's no way... There's just no way!"



"I can't possibly use that."

The girls started to reject the idea one by one. I observed Ike and the other guys to see how they're finding everything so far. A lot of them were looking at the girls in annoyance. On the surface, it does sound like the girls in our class were being naggy. However, as boys, we couldn't possibly know how difficult this situation is for the female gender. Like them, I chose to stay silent.

I'm already relieved that no unnecessary arguments were being made. I can tell that they were just waiting for Hirata, Horikita, or my instructions.

"Yoo-hoo~!"

All of us heard a piercing voice behind Chabashira-sensei. She was instantly alerted, but Chabashira-sensei acted a little too late. She was captured and hugged from behind.

"What are you doing?" Chabashira-sensei grunted.

"What~? Is it bad to be friendly? I honestly just wanted to see what you'd do," said Hoshinomiya-sensei, Class C's homeroom teacher.

Chabashira-sensei rolled her eyes in irritation.

"Whenever I touch your hair, it's always so smooth, Sae-chan~!"

"Don't you understand the school's rules at all? Eavesdropping on other classes when they are giving information is inexcusable."

"Aww, I'm just an unimportant teacher, though. Even if I did hear something, I'd never tell." Hoshinomiya-sensei continued snuggling up close to Chabashira-sensei before her voice got gentler. "But doesn't this feel like fate? I can't believe that we both came to this island together."

Fate? I don't know what Hoshinomiya-sensei was getting at, but Chabashira-sensei chose to ignore whatever she meant by it.

"Shut up. Just hurry back to your class."

"Ah! Aren't those Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san? It's been so long!"

Horikita and I gave her a slight bow. Hoshinomiya-sensei smiled and addressed me.

"Summer is the season of love. If you want to confess your feelings to a girl you like, perhaps it'd be more effective while standing before the beautiful ocean?"

"The ocean may be beautiful, but I can't afford to do that while attending to my duties in class," I responded to her joke with a serious reply. Well, I was hoping that she was just joking...

The entirety of Class B stared at us. It was especially bad since I'm sure most of my classmates were still under the misconception that Horikita and I were dating.

"You need to be more carefree!" Hoshinomiya-sensei gave me a



thumbs up.

"Hey," Chabashira-sensei called out. "Should I report you to the school authorities for behavioral problems? Besides, I don't have any more time."

"Ooh, don't glare at me like that. Fine, fine, I get it. See you later~!"

Hoshinomiya-sensei walked away while waving at us. She also put on a totally-not-fake sad expression. At the same time, Chabashira-sensei instantly continued her explanations.

"Well then, allow me to elaborate on some additional rules."

The students of Class B gulped in anticipation. The words "*additional rules*" will surely be vital in this special test. Or at least, that's what we ought to believe.

"You'll be allowed to roam freely, but be extra aware of your surroundings because there are several designated '*spots*' on the island. In these spots, there is what's referred to as the right of exclusive possession. The class that obtains those rights is entirely free to determine how they wish to exercise them. However, rights of exclusive possession are only valid for a period of eight hours after being invoked, after which they are automatically revoked. This means that another class can acquire those rights at that time. Also, you gain one bonus point if you occupy a spot once. However, that point is provisional, and cannot be used during the testing period. Therefore, bonus points are calculated and added to your total after the test has ended. Because the school is constantly monitoring you, there is no room for fraud. Please be aware of that fact."

Hirata handed the manual to me. After a brief scan, I've come to understand the basics of how occupying a spot works. Apparently, there was some kind of apparatus installed near each spot, one which showed the rights of exclusive possession. However...

"Misuse of a spot would result in a 50-point penalty, huh?" I muttered.

"Yes, you cannot occupy a spot that is possessed by another class. You must wait until their rights are revoked. Breaking that rule will cost you, so please be aware of that risk."

Forcibly occupying spots should've been one of the plausible strategies in this exam, but the final rule made it impossible.

Among the rules for the right of exclusive possession was the existence of a "*leader*". The details that explained how having a leader works were highlighted in the manual.

On the seventh and last day of the test, we had the right to guess the identity of the other classes' leaders during the final roll call. If we managed to get it right, our class will obtain 50 points for each



correct guess. Conversely, the other class would have to pay 50 points as compensation.

Carelessly moving to acquire a spot would most likely lead to the identity of the leader getting discovered. However, those guesses would also come with their own risks. Answering wrong would also result in a 50-point penalty.

"One person must be chosen as the leader-- no exceptions. However, you are free to not participate. Please tell me once you've selected someone. At that time, I will provide you with a key card stamped with the leader's name. You have until roll call today. In the event that you do not decide by then, we will decide for you. That is all."

Chabashira-sensei finally finished her explanations.

"Alright, I want everyone's attention. Class B will start to move." I spoke as loud as I could.

Everyone listened intently. The girls had hopeful expressions, probably thinking about how I would fix the toilet situation. The boys readied themselves as this exam could prove them useful for the class, especially those who couldn't contribute much in the written tests.

The rules appeared complicated, but they were actually pretty simple. It'll take some time before everyone can get fully understand them. For now, we'll have to figure out what we're supposed to do.

This beach is like purgatory for us. Once we enter the forest, whatever we find will determine whether this exam will be heaven for us... or hell.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 3.1 - Base Camp

"First of all, it would be nice if our class can look for a base camp as soon as possible. I'm sure all of you are suffering under the heat and it'll probably get worse later at noon." I started laying out my thoughts. "Hirata and I will take the lead. Ken, Akito, and the other guys will help us carry the tent. I want each guy to carry something apart from their things. The girls are free to help if they want."

"Where will we go from here, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Hirata.

"Look, Class A's starting to move. They'll probably explore the forest and find someplace to set up camp. Of course, we'll do the same. However, since they're going on the west side of the island, I want us to explore the east side for ourselves, but we'll have to move now. If we make our base first, Class C and D will have no choice but to scramble along the center," I explained.

"That's so smart! Since Class A is our most dangerous opponent, it would make sense if we avoid them by monopolizing the opposite side of the island!" Karuizawa commented with a clap.

"As expected of Ayanokouji-kun!"

"He's so decisive!"

"Alright! We'll beat them by occupying more spots in the east!"

My excited classmates began gathering their things. We moved towards the east side of the island and passed by Ichinose's Class C.

When they saw us, Ichinose, along with Minamikata and her friends waved at me and Kikyou. It seems like there were still thinking about their next course of action.

"I understand Kushida-san being close with Ichinose-san and Class C, but it's great to see that even Ayanokouji-kun is on friendly terms with them," said Hirata.

"Well, I guess you can call us friends. I think I've mentioned this before, but I don't think Class C is our enemy."

"Kiyotaka-kun actually got pretty close with Ichinose-san from way back, you know?" Kikyou joined in on our conversation.

"Ohh... With how the class system works in our school, it's certainly rare to see two class leaders get along well with each other." Hirata smiled wryly.

"Don't worry. I'll still prioritize our class over my friendship with Class C."

"O-Oh, that's not what I'm getting at, Ayanokouji-kun... I also



think having a friendly relationship with other classes is wonderful. Sorry if I sounded hostile."

"Ah, you didn't, don't worry. It was my fault for misunderstanding your point."

The small talks continued as we walked towards the east-side forest. Our classmates were engaged in their own conversations, too.

After a short while, Hirata and I stopped in our tracks and turned to everyone.

"Is there anyone here who has experience with the outdoors? I have to admit, I am not adept when it comes to these situations," asked Hirata.

"The same goes for me," I added.

Everyone stopped and listened to our plea, but only silence and our classmates' hesitant expressions greeted us.

"Uhh..." Ike slowly raised his hand.

"Ike-kun, do you have any experience with moving around in this environment? It would be of great help for the class if you can teach us a thing or two." Hirata instantly set up the stage for Ike.

"I don't know if it's considered experience, but I used to go camping with my family ever since I was a kid..." Ike explained. "Ah-- but of course, I'm nothing compared to those who were in the boy scouts. If anyone in here was a member, then they're probably more worthy of your time. Ahaha..."

Ike would've been very hyped up to tell us all about his camping expertise. However, after that incident with Class D, Ike became visibly discouraged with his words and actions. He was severely and harshly criticized by the entire class along with Yamauchi. It's perfectly reasonable for his self-confidence to dip like this.

"Well, it doesn't seem like anyone else fits the bill. I want you to lead the class with us, Ike. I'm sure your knowledge would be helpful."

I don't know how knowledgeable Ike really is, but he's probably our best bet right now. On the other hand, Yamauchi is, objectively speaking, still completely useless at the moment.

"I'm not against it. If anyone has some sort of survival skills like Ike-kun, please feel free to let everyone know. We're all in this together."

And with that, Hirata encouraged cooperation. Well, at least I'd hope so. It's not that easy, especially in this environment. However, I think that as long as no conflict arises within the class, we'll probably be fine for the most part.



1st Day, 9:39 AM.

"Alright, everyone. This is a good place to stop and gather our thoughts. Please cool off among the shade," instructed Hirata.

"Ike, do you have any suggestions?"

"You're asking me?"

"Well, yeah. I'd like your input right now. The map in the manual is basically useless, but if I were to guess our current location, it'd probably be around here."

I pointed towards the middle-right part of the map, a few areas before the eastern beach. Well, it wasn't really clear if there was gonna be a beach on the east-most part of the island based on the map alone. The page where it's printed was as useful as a blank piece of paper.

"Then... I think our priority should be a clean source of water," replied Ike.

"Excellent, let's head straight from here. I'm pretty sure there's a river along the way."

"Oh! That's great!" Ike slowly started feeling more energetic.

"Normally, I would suggest making a few search party teams to find a good place for a base, but I think Ayanokouji-kun's instruction will yield us a much faster result," said Hirata.

Our classmates listened to our conversation in silence. At this moment, they had no choice but to rely on us. Since everyone knew the importance of cooperation, no one really went against the decisions we've been making so far. It's not like anyone had better suggestions, anyway.

After a considerable amount of time has passed, I felt a sudden change in temperature. Ike's body perked up as he approached me.

"Do you feel that, Ayanokouji? It suddenly got colder. A big water source is probably near. The river you were talking about might be right around the corner," he whispered.

"Alright, Ike. Can I ask you and your friends to go ahead and scout the area?"

"Sure!" Ike walked up to his friends and asked them to go with him.

Professor and Ijuuin declined as it was already taking their all just to keep up with us. It was an understandable response given how they were built.

After they left, Horikita approached me from behind.

"It's great that Ike-kun and the rest are finally having their time to shine, but I suddenly feel useless," she sighed.

It's rare for her to confide in me with something like this.

"That's just the way things are when the battlefield is in a completely foreign territory. But don't worry about it, Horikita. I'll



need you later, that's for sure," I replied.

"I'll cooperate as effectively as I can."

After a few minutes, Ike's group finally reunited with the class.

"It's up ahead! There's a river just a couple of minutes away from here!" he announced.

"That's great!"

"A river!"

"Nice!"

"Good job on finding it, Ike-kun. We'll head there together. You lead the way." Hirata praised them accordingly.

"It's all thanks to you, Ayanokouji. You knew about the river from the start, right?" Ike addressed me excitedly.

I only nodded in response and let Ike direct the entire class. When he said "*a couple of minutes*", Ike probably referred to '*running speed*'. It took us ten or fifteen minutes of walking before we finally saw and heard the running river water.

"Here it is!"

"Wow, so clean!"

"We have water!"

"It's tempting us to swim in it!"

The class was excited upon seeing the river. We walked on the hard, grassy lands beside it to find the perfect place to set up camp.

"Ayanokouji, we saw it around here. A mechanism of some sort." Yamauchi and Miyamoto called out to me and pointed towards a direction that was a little further ahead.

"A mechanism?"

Class B continued its march before finally arriving at a very conspicuous place. An unnaturally placed boulder was sticking out on the riverside.

"This should be the equipment for occupying a spot," announced Hirata.

A screen of some sort was attached to the boulder. Like Chabashira-sensei has said earlier, we'd need the leader's key card to officially occupy this spot.

"Woohoo! A spot!"

"We're totally killing it!"

The class celebrated happily upon hearing his words.

"This should be a good place to set up camp, right Kiyotaka-kun?" Kikyō asked as she approached me with a bunch of her friends.

There were a lot of noticeable places on the island. On the west side, a cave, a tower, a cliff, a strange forest area, and a small gulf were easily recognizable from the ship. It makes sense as to why Class A would head in that direction. Their initial position only helped avoid suspicion unlike us who were obviously aware of



where we were going.

On the surface, it seemed like the western parts of the island were the best places to horde spots and points, however, I never saw any suitable water source near that area. Since the southern beach was our starting point, it only makes sense that there would be no immediate spots that we can find and occupy. However, if we go on a small journey, the northeastern side had a river. If we go directly east from there, we'd be on the north side of the eastern beach. From the cruiser, I also noticed a small landform. At first, I thought it was another cave, but as the ship moved along, it actually turned out to be a small rock tunnel. I wonder if there's a spot in that place, too. Directly south of the eastern beach was a very noticeable live oak tree due to its enormous size. It's very likely for that area to have a spot somewhere, but the absence of food and water source would render that place unsuitable as a base.

In the end, this riverside is the most ideal place we can find in the meantime.

"Let's find a grassy and balanced terrain. We'll make our base there," I suggested.

"Okay!"

It was 11:57 AM when I checked my wristwatch. In my opinion, we were pretty fast in finding a nice place to stay. We didn't need to split up or do anything risky. I wonder how the other classes are faring right now?

#### *Authors' Notes:*

*The pier was on the southern beach of the island. When the classes were given supplementary instructions, Class A to D was positioned from west to east, respectively. This was the reason why Class A was observed to explore the western part of the island after going straight north from their starting position. On the other hand, Kiyotaka's Class B would arrive at the middle part of the island if they went straight north. If this were to be the case, they would most likely find the well that Ichinose and her class initially found in the canon. However, Kiyotaka's strategy is to monopolize the spots in the eastern part of the island. Class C and D's initial positions were near the east. That was also the reason why Class B passed by in proximity of Class C as they went into the forest. In the canon, since Kiyotaka was in Class D, their initial position was already in the eastern-most part of the student body. That's why they found the river even if they only walked straight north from their starting*



*position.*



## Vol. 3: Chapter 3.2 - Troublesome Guy

"Are you choosing this place as your base camp?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Yes," replied Hirata.

"Alright," she nodded. "We'll hold the roll call in this place later at 8 PM. Please be on time."

"We understand, Sensei."

After placing our things on the ground, I asked for everyone's attention once more. Hirata and Karuizawa gathered our classmates effortlessly, indicating their positions as the class's other leaders.

"I would like to distribute tasks to everyone. I know some of you aren't used to this yet, so feel free to tell me if you disagree with anything. I'll do my best to compromise."

"Uhm, Ayanokouji-kun, what will you do about the toilet?" Shinohara asked timidly.

"Don't worry about that. According to the manual, we can install temporary toilets. They'll cost 20 points each," I answered.

The girls visibly sighed in relief.

"Don't you think spending 20 points for a toilet is too much? The same goes for other things. We can probably find food on our own, and water won't be a problem with the river here." Yamauchi spoke with reason.

A lot of the boys agreed with his opinion. I'm impressed with his perfectly logical idea which would save us points. The girls started to panic in response. They looked at me with pleading expressions, seemingly asking for help.

Matsushita and Nishimura didn't wait for my response. They decided to debate with Yukimura on this one.

"No. If you haven't caught up yet, this test isn't about saving up all of our points. That strategy is just not realistic. It's especially true for sanitation. In my honest opinion, this test is all about using our points effectively. Our goal is to get by using the least amount of points possible. However, spending is inevitable," Nishimura explained.

"Won't we get ahead if we restrain ourselves as much as we can?" Yukimura asked, supporting Yamauchi's initial statement.

"Yes, but it's too risky. If the health of our classmates starts deteriorating, our suffering will be all for naught," replied



Matsushita.

"It's not just for their physical well-being, too, Yukimura-kun. Using a faulty toilet will build up stress and anxiety for everyone. I support Ayanokouji-kun's decision to buy a good one." Hirata joined the conversation to back us up.

"We'll set a goal. I want us to have at least 150 points remaining by the end of the exam," I said.

"150? You're planning to spend half of our points?"

"Isn't that a little too much, though?"

A lot of the boys voiced out their doubts.

"Well, from a realistic standpoint, I think it's already plenty. Remember, we'll be here for a whole week," I explained.

Kikyou, Karuizawa, and Hirata agreed with most of my suggestions. In the end, I managed to convince everyone by promising that there will be no unnecessary spending. Class B had come to an agreement.

After asking for one temporary toilet, I also ordered a bunch of blue vinyl bags. I think I asked for too much, but that's also part of my plan.

"Firstly, I would like the boys to set up the tents. And then, we will order a bunch of fishing rods to hunt for food."

"Can anyone here even fish?" asked Karuizawa.

"I know how! You can leave it to me, Ayanokouji. I'll teach anyone who's assigned with me." Ike raised his hand with a grin.

"Great, I'll be counting on you, Ike. Next, I want to assemble a search party for finding edible fruits in the forest."

"We'll do it!" Kikyou and her friends instantly raised their hands.

"Hmm... Alright, but I want some guys to come with you. Akito, Ken, can you come with Kikyou and her group?"

"Kiyopon, can we tag along with them?" Haruka jumped in with enthusiasm.

"Oh, sure." I nodded in agreement.

"I'm pleased to work with you, Sakura-san, Hasebe-san!" Kikyou happily received my friends from the Ayanokouji Group.

"Leave it to us, Kiyotaka!" Ken and Akito gave me a thumbs up.

For now, they'll be helping us set everything up. Their group will set out later, around 2 or 3 in the afternoon.

"Finally, I want everyone else to help in securing our things. We'll have to prepare for the first night. It would be nice if we're up and ready before the sun goes down!"

"Sure!"

"We'll do our best!"

"Let's go, Class B!"

Hearing a chain of commands would give them the impression



that I have everything figured out. Because of that, my classmates became more willing to hear me out and follow my instructions.

"Ayanokouji-kun, what will we do about drinking water?" asked Hirata.

"Good question. This river is certainly an option, but we have to be extra careful. I assume that a lot of the girls wouldn't want to drink from this, right?" I faced them to take in some opinions.

"No way..."

"Swimming is fine, but drinking? I don't know about that..."

"We might get stomachaches and stuff."

The girls pointed out some valid points.

"I think it's fine. The water is visibly clean. It looks like spring water, too," said Ike.

Of course, the girls still had doubts in their expressions.

"Alright, we'll hold on to this idea. I'm assigning Horikita, Satou, Matsushita, and Mori to check out the source of this river. If it's a spring, then we'll consider drinking from it. And to be extremely sure, we'll be boiling the water for 5 to 10 minutes in order to eliminate all sorts of bacteria." I turned to Ike for confirmation. "Is that a viable method, Ike?"

"Hmm... Yeah, I'm pretty sure it is. We used to boil natural water back then, too. I don't remember how long it took, but 5 or 10 minutes should be enough." Ike nodded in response.

"Horikita, Matsushita, Satou, Mori, is it alright if the four of you go right now?" I asked.

"I'm fine with it."

"Same here."

"Yep~!"

Horikita gave me a sharp look before nodding. When she passed by me, I whispered softly and asked her.

"Are you alright? You don't have to force yourself if you're not feeling well."

"I'll be fine. I'll go since I want to contribute as well. But, thank you for your concern, Ayanokouji-kun," she replied.

"Kikuchi, Makida, can you two accompany them?"

The two guys nodded and followed Horikita and the others.

Ike and his pals happily started fishing as soon as Chabashira-sensei provided us with the necessary equipment.

When the temporary toilet was installed, I took a lot of the stacked vinyl bags and arranged them accordingly.

"Ike, do you know how to make a fire source?" I called out and asked him.

"Huh?! A fire source, you say?! You mean a campfire?! I do, but we can probably do that later! It's not even past 1 in the afternoon!"



Ike yelled from a distance.

"Oh, I think a campfire is essential in the night, but I'm just talking about a small fire source," I elaborated.

Sensing that I have some sort of plan, Ike gave his fishing spot to Hondou and approached me.

"Inogashira-san, you're quite good with handling craft stuff, right? Can I have a word with you for a moment?" I called out to another classmate, Inogashira. According to Kikyuu, she was good at things like knitting and stuff like that.

Well, I'm not really planning on making her knit anything, but I'd like her help, regardless.

"M-Me? You need something from me, Ayanokouji-kun?!"

She was surprised and flustered. I didn't talk much with her, so it was perfectly reasonable. After some encouragement from her friends, including Kikyuu, Inogashira finally approached me and Ike.

"These vinyl bags are supplied to us in unlimited amounts, remember? I thought we could use them in other ways."

"Uhm, are you talking about blankets or pillows, Ayanokouji-kun?" Inogashira asked meekly.

"Exactly."

"Ohhh! So that's why you wanted a fire source! Good job on picking that up, Ayanokouji!" Ike finally understood what I was trying to do. "Wait, can I borrow the manual for a bit?"

I gave the manual to Ike. He was looking for an item that should've been the obvious option. I was careless and overlooked it.

"Here! We can order a bunch of candles just for 2 points. We won't need to build a fire source if you're willing to spend that much."

"I think getting those candles is the best option. If some of them are left for future use, we can save up the battery life of our flashlights."

"You're planning to attach some of the vinyl bags together by burning them, right? Won't we get in trouble?"

I turned to Sensei, indicating that we wanted her to answer.

"If you're going to use candlelight to manipulate the physical structure of these vinyl bags, then it won't be enough to be considered polluting the air. However, once the testing period is over, you'll have to dispose of them properly. Leaving them on the island won't be an option since it will be considered as land pollution," she explained.

"We're in the green then."

"Just be careful about handling fire in general."

And with that, another plan was followed through.



Under my orders, some boys were assigned to pull out some grass and weeds. The girls working with Inogashira stuffed them inside the vinyl bags. They then used candlelight to carefully close up the opening of the vinyl bags. Just like that, we made ourselves some pillows. It was way easier with the blankets and mats. We just cut the vinyl bags open and reattached them using the same method.

"Our base camp is progressing nicely. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hirata.

"Nah, it's all thanks to everyone's cooperation. Ike's camping knowledge had been a lot of help, too."

"If you weren't leading us, I doubt we could do everything as effectively."

A lot of my classmates voiced out their praises and gratitude towards me.

Time passed by quickly and it was already 2:15 PM.

"Kouenji, do you want to scout out the island with me?" I asked.

For the past few hours, Kouenji did nothing but relax on top of a tree branch. The class was obviously displeased with his carefree attitude, but we've already taken his behavior into account.

"Hoh? Are you asking for my company, boy? I certainly don't swing that way, but if it's not your intention, then maybe I'd be willing to come." Kouenji smiled while giving me a sharp glance.

"I wanted to check out the island's central area. You've probably rested enough. Are you up for it?"

"Hmph, I suppose going out for an exercise isn't a bad thing for this already perfect body of mine."

Kouenji dropped down elegantly and walked past me.

"We'll head out on the opposite side now, Kiyotaka-kun," said Kikyoku.

"We'll be back by sundown." Akito waved at me.

After setting out, I finally caught up to Kouenji's considerably fast walking pace. He started climbing up the trees with speed like a shinobi. He certainly seemed like a city boy like I am, but his quick movements indicated otherwise.

While observing my surroundings, I followed his lead and started climbing on top of the trees.

"Ah, my impeccable perfection is complemented by the beauty of nature."

He started talking to himself while basking in the sunlight.

"I truly am beautiful-- just perfect."

Kouenji had an absurd amount of stamina. He didn't even look tired even after jumping from one tree to another.

"You're still here, boy?" He sounded like he just noticed my



existence this time.

"Why'd you stop?"

"Hmm... As a common folk, I would like to ask you something." I wasn't sure where he was looking since his back was facing me. "Do you notice anything?"

I looked at my surroundings with critical awareness. The land, the types of trees, the terrain, the plants, the soil...

I see...

I jumped to where Kouenji was. We were currently standing on top of two huge branches on the opposite sides of the same tree.

"The way to the cave is right there... And it seems like there's an unnatural plot of land if we head a little bit south from here."

"It seems like you have at least a decent pair of eyes, Ayanokouji-boy."

"Are you finally willing to help the class, Kouenji?"

This was the question that we, of Class B, wanted to ask this flamboyantly narcissistic classmate of ours for the longest time.

"Help? What kind of question is that?" Kouenji disregarded my question as some sort of nonsense.

"Well, you just showed me a way to some key locations. I guess I can consider that as help."

Kouenji scoffed before finally jumping off the tree. Of course, I followed him down.

"Let me make something clear. I do what I want to do. I couldn't care less about what was happening in the class. If my actions benefit them, then that's that. Of course, the opposite is also true." Kouenji's wide smile was unchanging.

"Then, you won't stop even if your actions compromise our class's points as long as you will it so?"

"Naturally." Kouenji fixed his hair with a harrumph. "And just so you know, I find this test extremely boring."

He glanced at me with a provocative smile.

"What are you saying?"

"Oh, come on, Ayanokouji-boy. You're not someone at the bottom of the food chain. I'm sure you can infer what my intention is."

"You're planning to retire?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

"We'll lose 30 points because of it."

"I don't think that's my problem."

"You're a member of the class, aren't you? Wouldn't you want to help us reach Class A?"

"Hmph, if you think I care about that, then you're sorely mistaken. This school is just not aware of my boundless potential. It doesn't matter whether I'm in Class A or D, for that matter. I will



simply do what I want."

"I see... Is there any way for me to convince you?"

"It's up to your imagination."

*\*Fwip\**

*\*Thud\**

I launched a roundhouse kick towards his head. Kouenji successfully defended against the blow by using his arms.

"Oho? I didn't expect you to have a feisty side, Ayanokouji-boy. I can't decide if I like it or not."

"Don't you want to strike back, Kouenji?"

"Hmph, I would do so if I wanted. But I don't find your existence ugly, so I'll restrain myself this one time."

"Is that a threat? What if I don't stop?"

"Then I'll have no choice but to punish you accordingly." Kouenji's arrogant grin remained firm.

"Punish me? Do you think you're capable of doing that?"

Kouenji didn't respond. He simply started walking away. As expected, he felt that I was still holding back with my kick. Despite that, his forearm got bruised. Kouenji should be aware of our difference in power right about now.

Just from that encounter, I could easily tell that Kouenji was an absolute unit of a fighter. Exercising daily really helped me retain at least some of my previous strengths. I wouldn't have dealt that much damage if I continued neglecting my physical condition.

There wasn't a rule about engaging in a violent confrontation with a fellow classmate. However, even if I do beat him, he will use the injuries he'd sustain as a reason to retire, regardless.

Despite everything, Kouenji was still unfazed and confidence filled his smile.

"Are you seriously retiring?"

"Hmph, I'm feeling unwell. I have no choice but to do so," he smilingly replied before continuing his march. "See you later, Ayanokouji-boy."

And with that, Kouenji turned around and headed back in the direction of our base.

Sigh... He really is a troublesome guy.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 4.1 - The Leader

I returned to our base a bit later than Kouenji, at around 3:00 PM.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're back." Hirata greeted me along with the rest of the remaining Class B students in the camp.

"Yeah, I hurried back after scuttling all over the place. Before I go over the next phase of our plans, why don't we decide on who's going to be the leader? That way, we can officially occupy the spot in this river and start earning points," I suggested.

"Well, we were actually talking about that earlier. Everyone agreed that you're the best choice for it."

Our classmates nodded their heads almost in unison.

"Me, huh?"

"Like, Hirata-kun and I just stand out too much. The same can also be said with Kushida-san. The best choices were you and Horikita-san, but Class D is targeting her, right?" said Karuizawa.

Hmm... They certainly have a point. I don't think Class A and D are that aware of me. And I don't think Ichinose would carelessly try to choose me when we guess the leaders' identities on the last day. On the other hand, even if the other two classes are wary of Horikita, it's not like they'll just put her name on the paper without any basis.

Regardless, I can understand why they wanted me as the leader.

"Sorry if we kind of decided this while you were gone. Of course, you can decline," said Hirata.

"No, it's fine. You guys have surveyed the perimeter, right? If no one else is around, then it's probably safe to occupy the spot as soon as now. Let's report to Chabashira-sensei and tell her that I will be the leader," I replied.

"Alright! Ayanokouji is our leader!"

"Shh! Don't be too noisy!"

"It's fine, isn't it? We've been on guard this whole time. There shouldn't be any spies around us this early in the exam."

"But still!"

I let my classmates continue whatever they were doing. Right now, the morale of Class B is extremely high. If things continue like this, I would be able to freely move around and look for more spots.



"Alright, here's your key card, Ayanokouji. Handle it with care," Chabashira-sensei said as she handed me a small card with my name on it.

"I will. Thank you, Sensei." I formally received the card and shoved it inside my jersey pant's left pocket.

At 3:10 PM, Class B has gained the right of exclusive possession to the spot near the river. We have officially received 1 provisional point.

"Where's Kouenji, by the way?" I asked.

"Kouenji-kun returned a while ago, but he said he'd go swimming for a bit," replied Hirata.

"Sigh... I knew it."

"What do you mean, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"He's probably going to retire soon."

"What? What do you mean? Did something happen between you guys?"

"Not really. Kouenji probably planned to retire since the start of the test after deciding that he didn't like how it's going to be."

"If he didn't like... What...?"

Even Hirata couldn't comprehend Kouenji's actions.

"Kouenji just acted on his whim. He does what he wants without a care for anything else. Or at least, that's what he told me. I tried to convince him, but it didn't work."

Hirata turned to our busy classmates with a grave expression.

"If our class finds out about this, they would surely be upset."

Being the class's hero, I'm sure Hirata will try to talk it out. But given how Kouenji was, it'll be futile to even try.

"You don't have to find and convince Kouenji, Hirata. It can't be helped this time. We'll just have to work around the penalty."

"I still want to try..." Hirata looked at me with resolute eyes.

"I know you mean well, but our classmates need you here, right now. Trust me, whatever you tell him won't work." I shook my head in response.

"I see... So that's 30 points down the drain, huh?" Hirata smiled bitterly.

"It's fine. We'll find a way to earn it back up."

Right now, our base camp looked really nice. We bought three Fishing Rod, four Small Tents, a Temporary Toilet, Candles, and Cookware with gas. 62 points spent, all in all. Using the nearest trees from our location as cover, finding this place shouldn't too easy. Six tents were set up on the flatlands for both boys and girls. A few meters from our base camp were the simple toilet and temporary toilet. The tents were set in a way that we can have effective meetings and meals together as a group. Surprisingly the



best fishing spot was also the area where the mechanism is.

"I've been thinking about what to do with our meals. They cost 6 points per individual, but if we buy an entire set for the class, we would only spend 10 points. It also comes with a free bottle of water for each person."

It was a very worth deal, indeed.

"Remember, we can have fish and fruits from Ike and Kikyuu's groups. We'll probably be able to hold on by consuming them, especially with our cookware. We can also buy more fishing rods if needed," I explained. "But I have no problems with buying the food sets if our own provisions turn out to be lacking."

"I see. They'd certainly help. Everyone has already agreed with eating two meals a day. That would very much lessen the demand for food."

"Yeah, we have the river for bathing and we can also use the temporary toilet and simple toilet as dressing rooms. There's no need to buy the temporary shower for our hygiene."

There's also an item called a *"Water Shower"* but we don't really know what it does.

We'll probably have to assign schedules if we want to bathe in the river. And of course, we'll have to be mindful of the proximity. After all, we're also planning to use the river for drinking, too.

"Alright, Hirata. I want you to gather everyone again."

Hirata simply nodded in response. Once again, with Karuizawa and his help, the students of Class B were in front of me and ready to listen.

"Kouenji, Kikyuu's group, and Horikita's group aren't back yet so we'll just have to inform them later."

I started explaining what else I can share with them. Firstly, I let Karuizawa and the other girls handle the bathing rotations. I specified the locations of the bathing areas based on the water's running direction and depth. That way, our bathing sessions won't affect the cleanliness of our drinking water should the source turn out to be a clean spring.

Next up were the future search and scouting parties, along with the other main roles. I had Ike take the lead in preparing the campfires and teaching more students how to fish. He and his helpers will be staying at the base camp for the rest of the week. For the search party, they would be led by me and our focus will be on looking for spots. On the other hand, the scouting party is tasked to secure the perimeter on a regular basis. They would patrol around the base camp to check if any intruders pass by.

For the rest of the class, separate roles will be distributed for the upcoming scheduled chores. I've assigned Karuizawa and Shinohara



to take the lead, along with Kikyuu. Finding the food, storing them, and cooking them-- Washing some clothes if needed, waste disposal, etc. There were a lot of tasks to be done.

As a precaution, I asked everyone to approach me or Hirata should any conflict arise.

Our main goal was to stay consistent. If we can hold out until the end, then our results will be stellar.

"Alright, Ayanokouji-kun. We hear you. We'll do everything we can. Right, everyone?" Hirata turned to our classmates, trying to rally them up.

"Yeah!"

"You got it!"

"Let's do this!"

"We won't fail you, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"Class B will win this!"

Everyone cheered with overflowing enthusiasm. With how smoothly our base has developed, no one really had any complaints.

"I'll try my best to find more spots. If we're lucky, we might even get the chance to find out the other classes' leaders," I said.

"Oh!"

"It'd be great if that could happen!"

"As expected of Ayanokouji-kun!"

"We'll be Class A in no time!"

They might be getting overly excited now.

And there's still the fact that Kouenji will drop out.

It would be extremely dangerous if other classes discover my identity as the leader. Even if we occupy many spots and rack up the most points, all of them will be negated in the end if my cover is blown. I need to be careful about that.

As of now, I have no knowledge of what the other classes are up to. I might need to check in on them out as soon as tomorrow.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 4.2 - The Sun is Down

"Everyone, we're back!"

"Hey there~!"

Around 4:00 PM, we finally heard the returning voices of Mori and Satou. With them were the rest of the group members; Horikita, Matsushita, Makida, and Kikuchi.

"We have good news. It really was a spring. We should be able to drink this water," announced Matsushita.

"Oh yeah! I told you it was clean." Ike pumped his fist in the air.

"The terrain was pretty tough on some parts, but it should be pretty easy to go there again. Horikita-san said that a spot might be hidden somewhere," said Makida as he approached me. "We found some food on the way. We're not sure if all of them are edible, though."

They tried to hand me a bunch of fruits.

"Please give them to Ike. He can evaluate whether they're good or not," I replied.

From a short distance, I heard Makida and Kikuchi engage in a spirited conversation with Ike and the rest of his group. It's rare to see the mature Kikuchi look so enthusiastic.

"Oh, that's some good stuff you got there! Well, as a rule of thumb, we should avoid white and yellow berries..." Ike started picking out the appropriate fruits one by one. He really was knowledgeable about them.

"Ike-kun's been such a huge help, isn't he?"

"He hasn't been obnoxious for a while."

"To be honest, he's looked really cool ever since he took the lead in a lot of things."

The girls on the opposite side of the camp started murmuring about Ike in a very positive light.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can I have a moment with you?" asked Horikita.

"Sure," I replied before facing Hirata and the rest. "Can you fill in the rest about what we just talked about earlier?"

"Okay," nodded Hirata. "Mori-san, Matsushita-san, Satou-san, Kikuchi-kun, and Makida-kun, can you listen to us for a second?"

The other five were called out to the girls' area of the camp.

Horikita and I sat near the boys' tents. We didn't have any logs to sit on, but we found some large tree branches that can act as



alternatives. After telling her about the things I'd laid out earlier, it was finally her turn to report their findings.

"You've heard it from Makida-kun earlier. The river shifts from northeast to straight north before going northwest. The main reason why water was running towards the south was due to the source's elevation. It's above a hill with a pretty tall cliff at the end. The northern beach can be seen beyond it. We've left marks as you've instructed. We can head there again tomorrow if you want," she narrated.

"I see... Good job on that." I took out a piece of paper that and a ballpoint pen as I listened to her descriptions.

"This is..."

"It's what I've noted so far. The only help that the map on the manual gave me was the island's general shape."

For now, the detailed parts were the areas around our base camp and a little bit of the central area.

"You departed around two in the afternoon, right? Just how long were you running to cover this much ground...?"

I chose to ignore Horikita's question so I can explain the more important things.

"From what I've observed, the terrain and tallgrass patches that are scattered around the island serve as clues as to where some key locations are."

"Tallgrass? I see... Then, I'm a bit curious about this. It's right next to a tallgrass according to your map." Horikita pointed at a marked location. "It's leaning near the west-side of the island. What did you find there?"

"Corn."

"Really?"

"It's man-made cultivation, too. That says a lot about how this island is structured."

"So it really was the case. I've noticed that too. The paths were deliberately laid down so people would rarely get lost during the day... But as expected, their purpose isn't solely about helping us."

"Yeah. Because the paths are already laid down before us, the thought of randomly heading into another direction disappears. The unusual yet natural terrain along with the wall of tallgrass was carefully worked around on so that the spots can be easily missed by the people passing through."

"Of course, there are exceptions like this river where the spot was conspicuously placed," she said.

I looked at Horikita, who was focused on my impromptu map.

"Are you okay, Horikita? How are you feeling?"

Surprised by my sudden question, Horikita softly cleared her



throat before responding.

"If you're talking about my fever, then it's still there, unfortunately. But you don't need to worry. Chabashira-sensei didn't confiscate the medicine we bought so I can still take them regularly."

She didn't confiscate them? I guess it's not against the rules as long as it's already a part of our luggage.

Or maybe...

"I see. I wanted you to be a part of the search party with me, but if you're unable to, then I wouldn't want to force you."

"I'll be okay. Please let me join the group."

"Alright, I'll take your word for it, Horikita."

Finally, Horikita and I decided on the other group members for the search party. They'll be Okitani, Makida, Onodera, and Matsushita. The fewer people involved, the better. However, I have to consider that the other classes will look out for our leader once they encounter anyone in the class. If they find out that our group's purpose isn't just recon, but also spot occupation, then their choices will be instantly narrowed down to whoever was present. Six people shouldn't be too bad. I also have to take their physique into account. Any guy should be fine as long as they're not Ijuuin or Professor. For the girls, Onodera was easily the most athletic of the bunch. I chose Horikita and Matsushita for their overall qualities in terms of quick-thinking and athleticism.

Kikyuu, Yokoyama, or Shinohara were plausible choices, but they can help out in other places.

After giving them a small rundown of my plans, we decided to help out in the base camp for the rest of the day.

1st Day, 5:57 PM

"Alright, can I ask you guys to find some tree branches? It'd be great if you can bring smaller ones." Ike instructed us.

"Alright, Ike-kun," nodded Hirata. "Let's make two groups of four and find some. One will be led by me and the other will be led by Ayanokouji-kun."

My group consisted of Horikita, Professor, and Ichihashi. We explored the southern part of our camp where Kikyuu's group and my friends looked for food. Of course, we saw the marks they left behind, indicating that they've traveled in this area.

Meanwhile, Hirata's group explored the western area of our base.

We were considerably near the camp and even though it was almost 6:00 PM, a bit of sunlight still illuminated the island. After all, it was the summer season.

Our group collected a bunch of small wood branches and dried



leaves.

"This exam really isn't for me and Wataru-dono. It is quite hard to move around so we cannot demonstrate the true extent of our powers. You've also noticed our struggle, haven't you, Ayanokouji-dono?" Professor said as he fixed up his glasses.

Like Professor, Ijuuin also volunteered to help with the search and joined Hirata's group.

"It's fine. As long as you do what you can in the base camp, it'll be enough contribution for the class."

"Surely," he nodded proudly. "Making those mats and pillows was a new and refreshing experience. I never thought I'd utilized these hands of mine for craftsmanship. After all, I was born to conquer technology."

I don't know if he's referencing anything so I just stayed silent.

"Horikita-san, I'm really sorry about the misunderstanding I've brought upon you and Ayanokouji-kun. I've been trying to clear it up with everyone as fast as I can." Ichihashi took this chance and apologized to me and Horikita.

"It's alright. No harm was done to me or Ayanokouji-kun, anyway." Horikita shrugged it off after hearing that the problem was slowly getting mended.

I thought she'd be more against the rumor and would want it to be cleared up as soon as possible, but she's acting more cool-headedly than I expected.

A few minutes passed and we can already see the light from our base. The smoke looked faint, but it was barely noticeable.

"It seems like Hirata-kun's group has returned first," said Ichihashi.

"At least we'll be able to head back quickly even if it's already quite dark," added Horikita.

After judging that our loot was enough, the four of us decided to return. As we turned around, a familiar voice called out to us.

"Oh, is that you, Horikita-san, Ichihashi-san? Sotomura-kun and Kiyotaka-kun, too!"

Kikyuu called out to us from a distance. With her were Ishikura, Onodera, Nishimura, Inogashira, and my friends from the Ayanokouji Group.

"Ya-ho~! We're back Kiyoon!" yelled Haruka.

"Welcome back, Kushida-san and the rest of you! We were asked to get some leaves and branches for the campfire," greeted Ichihashi.

"Ohh, so it really was a campfire. I thought we were about to get lost because the sun was already down. The light from our base camp helped guide us back," Kikyuu replied with a smile.



"Ken, are you alright?" I asked the most haggard-looking guy in the group.

"U-Ugh... Yeah... I just... need to... use the toilet..." he replied with an expression of suffering.

"This idiot ate some sort of weird berry. His stomach started acting up later on." Akito explained to me with a shrug.

"It's just the usual idiot Kencchin, I guess," Haruka commented while shaking her head.

When our big group got back, the rest of the class received us with joy. Everyone gathered around a simple campfire that was skillfully made by Ike and the others.

"They're back!"

"Kushida-san!"

"Oh! You've got tons of stuff with you, Kushida-chan!"

Ken bolted towards the temporary toilet. The rest of the class readied everything for our supper later in the evening.

Meanwhile, Hirata approached me with a guilty expression.

"Ayanokouji-kun... There's something I'd like to tell you..." Hirata turned in a certain direction.

It was a little bit far from the main place where our classmates stayed. There, I saw a female student leaning against a tree.

"You see, when our group was out there, we stumbled upon Ibuki-san of Class D. Her face was swollen and it was already sundown. We couldn't just leave her alone.

Ibuki Mio, of Class D...

"Did you leave a mark on where you found her?"

"Ah, yeah, I did."

"Alright, that's fine. You made the right decision, Hirata. I'm alright with having her stay here, for now."

"Great! Most of our classmates already agreed. We were willing to have a discussion if you happen to be against it, but as expected, you're really kind, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Nah, I'm just showing the bare minimum amount of human decency like all of you did. It's nothing special." I glanced in Ibuki's direction before turning back to Hirata. "Of course, it's also possible for her to be a spy."

"You're right. That's why the talk of opposition came up," he nodded, looking somber.

Hirata and I approached Ibuki. I wonder how she wound up in that place. Was Class D's base camp near? If so, I would've noticed their presence when I was scouting out the area earlier, or did they just arrive recently?

"Ibuki-san, how are you? Is everything alright?"

"I'm okay. You don't need to bother with me."



"It's fine. You're welcome here."

"What are you saying, Hirata? I'm in Class D. I'm your enemy."

"It's fine, really. We're all students of the same school. And we can't just leave you there in the darkness. You're also injured--maybe we can help."

"What the hell...?"

Hirata's kindness overwhelmed Ibuki's aloof attitude. I feel you, Ibuki.

"Well, it seems like you already know each other. I'm Ayanokouji, by the way." I tried to be casual and friendly, but Ibuki responded with a sharp glare.

"I know who you are. That bastard won't stop talking about you and a girl named Horikita," she spat indignantly.

"That bastard? Are you talking about Ryuuen?" I asked.

"Who else would it be?"

"Is that injury of yours related to him?"

"That's none of your business."

Hmm... I couldn't really infer anything else other than her blatant dislike for Ryuuen. To be honest, I can't tell if she's acting or genuinely hating on him. If it's the former, then we have to be on extra high alert.

Ryuuen challenged us head-on after the contract signing. I'm curious to see how he's planning to beat us this time.

"Well, why don't you join us for a meal later?" asked Hirata.

"You just don't understand, do you? I'm a Class D student. I might be a spy." Ibuki glared at Hirata, looking at him straight in the eyes. She stood up and planned to leave.

"Wait, Ibuki-san. If you really were a spy, then you wouldn't want to leave, right?"

"I'll get chased away eventually. It doesn't matter if I leave now or later. I need to find a place to sleep."

"It's dangerous." Hirata shook his head. "Class B has its doubts, but after I convince them, I'm sure everyone will let you stay without a problem."

"You'll gain nothing by helping me."

"It's not about gains or losses, Ibuki-san. We want to help you if you can't return to your class tonight." At that moment, Hirata turned to me and asked a favor. "Ayanokouji-kun, can you please watch Ibuki-san for a bit? I'll talk to everyone about her."

And with that, Ibuki was left sitting there with me.

"He's a really nice guy, isn't he?" I started the conversation.

"Nice? Well, yeah, I guess. But he's also naive." Ibuki still looked displeased.

"Do you not want to talk about your injury?"



"This is nothing. Just a minor swollen cheek."

"If it was a fight between girls, then it must've been pretty wild."

"Tch..." Ibuki didn't really respond. 'Seems like it's quite the sensitive topic for her.

Hirata arrived shortly. He told us that the whole class agreed to let her stay. Of course, Kikyou backed him up at the forefront to convince everyone.

With a slightly awkward and despondent expression, Ibuki reluctantly stayed with Class B for the night.

"What's with this class...?" she muttered.

8:00 PM finally arrived. Chabashira-sensei held the roll call without any problems. At that moment, Kikyou noticed something odd.

"Sensei... You said that we have complete attendance, but where's Kouenji-kun?"

Because of his low presence and utter lack of involvement, everyone just noticed Kouenji's absence the moment Kikyou mentioned his name.

"Ah, Kouenji, huh? If you're curious about him, he decided to retire a while ago saying that he was feeling unwell. Of course, your class will be penalized by 30 points." Chabashira-sensei spoke loudly and clearly. It was so sudden that the class turned completely silent for a brief second, probably to process what they just heard.

"What?!"

"He retired?!"

"30 points will be gone just like that?!"

"Kouenji, you bastard!"

The whole class made quite an uproar. Hirata and I expected this already. This time, he resolved himself to preserve the class's morale despite this disaster.

"Everyone, I know it's unfortunate that Kouenji-kun has retired, but please calm down. As long we do everything consistently, we can earn those points back up."

"I agree with Hirata-kun. 30 points seems a lot, but if we spend our remaining points prudently, I think we'll be okay," Kikyou added her own words of reassurance.

"As long we have Hirata-kun and Ayanokouji-kun taking the lead, I'm sure we'll be fine," Karuizawa commented with a shrug.

It didn't take long until Class B gained its cool.

"Dang... That's 92 points taken from our 300."

"Kouenji-kun probably didn't even feel unwell..."

Some of them were still downtrodden, but it's not like there's



anything we can do.

After moving on from Kouenji's matter of retirement, it was finally time to eat.

Using the second-tier Cookware purchase that includes gas, some of our classmates prepared the food. The group that was tasked to boil river water earlier had prepared enough to hydrate the whole class. They used the gas canisters from the cookware set to heat everything up. With unlimited refills, buying the second-tier cookware set was really worth it. Ike and some of the guys who were possessed by their outdoorsy spirits chose to use the bonfire to grill some fish.

Even after our greatest efforts to find lots of food, we were barely able to feed the entire class without buying the meal set.

"Unless we find more food sources, we might need to spend those 10 points more than once," I said.

"That seems to be the case. We have 208 points left. As long everyone works hard, buying one meal set a day should be enough. If we can hold off on the last day, we'll be left with 158 points by the end," mused Hirata.

As long as everyone works hard, that is. Hirata would need to put in the effort to keep everyone's mental state as high as possible. That's his job.

As soon as she finished the roll call, Chabashira-sensei left us to our own devices. Hirata, Horikita, and I were allowed to follow Chabashira-sensei all the way to her special tent with the purpose of familiarizing the path. It wasn't too far from our base camp and the way was quite easy to remember.

When the three of us returned, everyone was just about ready to hit the sack.

"Alright, Ayanokouji-kun. You should be quite tired for the day. We'll be in charge of the night watch so you can go ahead and get some rest."

It seems like I was assigned for tomorrow's night watch. I actually planned to wake up early tomorrow. Getting a good amount of sleep should be pretty nice.

"I see. I'll be heading inside the tent now. Be careful out here, Hirata."

"Yeah, thanks for today."

When I got inside the main tent for the boys, Ken, Makida, and Onizuka were already sleeping. The other guys were also resting inside the other tents. Of course, most of the girls were the same. Meanwhile, a handful of our classmates were hanging out by the bonfire.

As I laid on top of our vinyl mats, it finally dawned in on me that



we'll be living on this deserted island for a week.

I'm Class B's leader. Like Hirata, I have my own responsibilities. As someone who dislikes trouble, I can't say I'm fond of my position on a personal level, but if I wanted to test myself, I need to accept the side effects of showcasing my abilities.

It's alright. Once we reach Class A, this so-called "*Self-Test*" will finally come to an end. At that point, I can focus solely on enjoying my high school life to the fullest. Maybe doing that can answer some of the questions I have regarding this society, regarding this world...

Maybe I can also answer some questions regarding myself. Myself? Maybe it's more appropriate to say something like "*This person*".

At this point, I don't even know if I'm acting like my real self. I don't even know who or what my real self is. My only choice is to keep playing the person I am now.

The school, my classmates, the people I consider friends-- Hopefully, they can help me find some answers...



## Vol. 3: Chapter 5.1 - Under the Willow Tree

After a good seven hours of sleep, I woke up at around 4:30 AM. I checked Kikyuu's tent where Ibuki was supposed to rest. After seeing her sleeping peacefully, I proceeded towards the mechanism, alone.

Our right of exclusive possession got revoked at 11:10 PM last night, but we decided against reinvoking it immediately. After doing so, I returned to camp and swiftly scouted the perimeter. There are still no signs of Chabashira-sensei's arrival nor any other person's presence. With that, I sneakily approached the girls' area to check one student's luggage.

Ibuki Mio of Class D. Since her bag looks different from ours, it was fairly easy to find. I grabbed it without hesitation. Speed was essential if I don't want to be labeled as a pervert should anyone spot me doing this. Inside, I found the same kinds of things that everyone else had, like towels, a change of clothes, underwear, etc. However, one item had me intrigued.

"A digital camera, huh?" I muttered softly.

This item shouldn't have any practical use for surviving on a deserted island. I turned the camera upside down and found a rental sticker plastered at the bottom. I switched it on to check its usage. Surprisingly, there weren't any signs that it's been used at all. The battery was very much full and it didn't have any existing data.

Why did Ibuki have this?

Before long, I placed the camera back inside her bag. A lot of possible reasons were formulated inside my head. However, I can only ever know the truth once I get more information. I decided to kill some time by leaning against a nearby tree.

I observed the calming ambiance of nature. It was refreshing... and liberating.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun." A pretty face entered my distracted vision. "You're very early."

"Matsushita... Good morning." My inattentive greeting was met with Matsushita's smile.

She's really early too. If Matsushita woke up any earlier, she might've seen me rummaging through Ibuki's bag.



"Are you sleepy or something?" she asked before sitting down beside me.

"Not really... You can probably say that I'm just... captivated by nature... or something along those lines," I answered.

"So even Ayanokouji-kun can be this sentimental," she chuckled before looking at the sky, which slowly got illuminated by the sunrise. "But... I get what you mean."

I silently admired the soothing atmosphere of our place while being accompanied by a beautiful girl.

"Say..." Hearing Matsushita, I turned to my side to face her. Our faces got extremely close to each other. She's probably aware of what's happening given how flushed her cheeks looked. However, she acted like everything was normal and asked me a simple question. "Is it hard being a class leader?"

I turned away, feeling flustered with our actions. I don't know if my nervousness was seen from my facial expression, but I had to stop staring at her face at such a close distance. My male, teenage heart simply couldn't handle it.

"It sure is, but my position only requires me to think and move. As a *"class leader"*, Hirata's position is much harder, in my opinion."

"Oh, that's true. I wouldn't want to babysit a whole group of teenagers. I feel bad for Hirata-kun sometimes."

"See? It's especially hard during an exam which requires us to survive on a deserted island," I joked.

"The two of you have been doing a really great job so far, I think. I can't imagine our base being this cozy without your instructions."

"It's a group effort. Ike's been a huge help, too."

"Ohh, true. The girls' opinion of him is slowly shifting. He's surprisingly reliable," she said.

Ike has never exhibited arrogance with his knowledge. It goes to show how he genuinely likes to share what he knows about the outdoors. Of course, he's probably putting in the effort to fix his reputation in the class, too.

"Yamauchi-kun, meanwhile... I mean, he's there, but nothing's really changed about him. He's been adamantly hitting on girls whenever he's free."

Well, it can't be helped, I guess. At least he's not slacking off.

"I see..."

Matsushita shifted her position to face me.

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun... Whenever we talk, it's almost always about the current situation of the class. It's great that we're having a productive conversation, but I want our talks to be more, you know... casual..." Matsushita looked down with a bitter smile.

Casual conversations, huh?



Well, we've had those before. Matsushita had already shared many things about herself, so I feel a lot closer to her than most of the girls. Meanwhile, I've rarely talked about myself, probably because she wants to respect my privacy. I'm starting to like it's a bit unfair because I'm usually the one who's asking.

"Sure. I don't know how we always end up having a progress report instead of a normal conversation, but I'm down to talk about casual stuff."

Her expression lightened up upon hearing my reply.

"Great~! Then, let's talk about you."

"Oh... Okay."

It was almost like she was reading my mind. I was feeling a bit guilty due to how our conversations usually go. But now, I was given the chance to mend that feeling.

"Ichihashi-san cleared up the misunderstanding last night, so all of the girls got off Horikita-san's back. But I'm still curious, you know? Do you like Horikita-san? If no, then do you like anyone right now?"

Ah... Of course, this topic was on top of her priority list...

"No, not really. And I don't think I like anyone right now."

"Hm, hm, very direct. I understand, Ayanokouji-kun." Matsushita nodded with a satisfied expression. I suddenly felt like we were still engaging in a report-like conversation-- just with a different subject. "How about a crush then? Do you have a crush on anyone? It doesn't have to be someone from the class."

"Ah, no, I don't think so..."

"Hehh, I see..." Matsushita pondered for a second before facing me again. "You're aware that a lot, and I mean *a lot* of the girls in our class have a huge crush on you, right?"

What? Huge crush?

"Huh? No...?" I understand if they're fond of me like one would towards a reliable friend or classmate... But if it's the romantic kind of fondness--

"Are you serious...? Well, I guess that makes sense. The girls in our class are quite confident right now since Class B's Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is still unknown in the eyes of other classes. All of them were holding off on the idea of confessing," she explained.

"Wait, wait, wait. What you're saying is definitely intriguing, but how'd did you even get to know all of this? Are they even true?" My doubts should be grounded. Every girl in Class B has shown me a considerable amount of fondness and goodwill, but I'm not so self-conscious to misinterpret their nice attitudes as shows of romantic interest.

"Don't underestimate a girl's information network, Ayanokouji-



kun. I may not be as popular as Kushida-san, but I've got connections, too." Matsushita proudly grinned.

"I suppose..."

"Well, I guess you have to be ready, then. I think the dam's about to break for the girls in our class."

I don't think it's the best metaphor to get her point across, but I might have an idea of what Matsushita is talking about.

"Every girl in our class was freaking out when they saw you waving at the girls of Class C. They already felt threatened when they found out that you and Ichinose-san were good friends, you know?" Matsushita shook her head with a wry smile. "After seeing that you were also close with a lot of the girls in Class C, I think many Class B girls will start to test their luck and confess their feelings for you."

I've already heard about this from Kikyuu. It seems like one of her friends wanted to confess to me. But if Matsushita's words are true, then...

"You're not just teasing me with an elaborate lie, are you?"

"Ahaha~! It would make sense for you to say that, but you should start becoming more aware of your popularity now. Well, I guess that innocence is part of your charm." Matsushita raised an eyebrow before pointing a finger at me. "But don't let it get to your head, Ayanokouji-kun. Arrogance is a huge turn-off, especially for me."

"I don't think that'll ever happen, though... I have little to no knowledge about things like social popularity. Acting arrogant about it just isn't possible for a newbie like me." After all, arrogance means having an overflowing amount of self-confidence. While I am self-confident in things like academics and athletics, social interaction just isn't my forte.

"Well, you were a loner back in America, after all. It's understandable," she nodded.

Her response was what I would consider as a '*waiting move*' in chess. It seems like Matsushita wanted me to progress the conversation myself. The last part of her words earlier; "*Arrogance is a huge turn-off, especially for me.*", was a signal that she wanted me to shift the topic to her feelings on the matter.

"You keep saying things '*all of the girls in our class*', '*the girls of Class B*', etc. Does that mean you're one of them?" This should be within the range of responses that she was expecting. Matsushita should be thinking that she's in control of the conversation's flow.

"Oh~? You're curious about that, Ayanokouji-kun? What will you do if I'm one of the girls who like you?" I've been teased by a similar question a bunch of times in the past, so this one was quite expected.



"Who knows? I'd probably reject you if you ever confess to me," I shrugged.

"Eh-?! Do hate me or something? That's harsh, Ayanokouji-kun!" Matsushita started ranting adorably. She probably knew that I was joking.

"I'm kidding. It doesn't really matter whether it's you, the other girls in our class, or even my female friends. I'd be left speechless all the same. It's a first-time experience for me, after all." That was a good closing remark, in my opinion. I subtly brought it back to the general populace instead of isolating Matsushita's name.

"That's fair, I guess." Matsushita glanced at me with a smile.

"Speaking of which, you're quite popular yourself, Matsushita." I bounced the topic back at her.

"Really now?" That expression-- I've seen it a bunch of times from Kikyuu before. She's totally aware of how popular she is.

"Yeah, even Ichinose knows about you. Apparently, a few boys in her class were dropping your name."

"I see, that's pretty interesting." Her expression said otherwise. Matsushita wasn't interested in them at all. It makes sense. She doesn't even know who they are, but wouldn't she be willing to ask?

Now that Matsushita has switched positions with me as the *"interviewer"*, I'm finding it hard to ask a good question.

"You don't seem enthusiastic about the idea of popularity. Is it related to how you don't like troublesome things?"

"Not really~!" she chuckled. "Being popular naturally feels nice. I just don't care about other guys, I guess."

That's a pretty straightforward answer.

"If my understanding is correct, your words mean that you already have a guy in mind, right?"

"Ding-ding~! You're right on the money, Ayanokouji-kun!" Matsushita confirmed my suspicion in high spirits.

"Is it alright if I ask about the name of this boy?" I put on a joking tone.

"Boop-boop! No way!" She shook her head while crossing her forearms to form an 'X'. "Once you develop a crush on someone, then we can tell each other. It's all about the equivalent exchange, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Seems fair. That's a deal then."

"Sure~!"

So Matsushita likes someone. I wonder who he is? Well... I say that, but my brain latched onto the idea that Matsushita's mystery guy might be me. Because of Matsushita's words, I became more conscious of the girls around me. I developed some sort of hyper-awareness towards their actions.



For example, as Matsushita and I engaged in our friendly talk, Ishikura had a very subtle look of anxiety on her face when she saw the two of us. Does that mean she's one of the girls who like me? Or was she worried for her friend who likes me? I mean, what could be the reason for her slightly uneasy expression? I would've thought of other things, but my conversation with Matsushita made me more self-conscious.

To be honest it's a pretty interesting experience. She made me understand the nuances of friendship and romance in a way that books won't be able to accurately describe. I'm quite grateful for it.

*Author's Notes:*

*I drew a bootleg version of the map. Please feel free to make use of this to visualize the environment. I'm not saying that this is accurate or anything. I just want everyone to have an easier time, so I hope this helps.*

*Map with some of the Landmarks:*

*Map with the obstacles:*

*Map showing the Spots and each class's chosen routes:*



## Vol. 3: Chapter 6.1 - Frugality and Luxury

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun." Hirata greeted me with a smile.

It was currently 6:00 AM and everyone who was awake started to do their chores. I monitored Ibuki's tent the whole time and it wasn't long until she finally woke up. She's pretty early, but even if she decides to check the spot mechanism and see that it's been recently occupied, enough students are awake to throw her guesses off. The whole class was on guard, so if Ibuki ever tries to ask one of us about the mechanism, it's over for her should she turn out to be a spy.

Hirata Yousuke, a co-leader of Class B, and my close friend approached me with a refreshed expression. Looking at his wet face and hair, it seems like Hirata just finished washing up.

"Good morning, Hirata. You're early. Weren't on you on night watch?"

"It got pretty humid, so I woke up earlier than expected. I think it's great, though. I can help out our classmates more."

That's very Hirata-like of you, Hirata.

"Ayanokouji, Hirata, can you guys come here for a sec'?" Ike suddenly called out to us.

We arrived at Ike's position after a few paces. He was currently staring at the river with serious eyes.

"Is everything alright, Ike-kun?" asked Hirata.

"I think we have a problem?"

"A problem?"

I turned my gaze towards the glistening river water, which looked the same as it was the day before. I can't really see anything wrong with it.

"The water won't warm up even at the hottest period of the day. I don't think it's enough. If our classmates bathe in this cold water, someone's bound to get sick..." he explained.

"Ohh, how could you tell, Ike-kun?" Hirata asked with an awed expression.

"Well, my old man used to babble about things like dewpoint and humidity, but I can't really wrap my head around those. The only thing I can do is feel stuff to know how they affect one another."

Hirata and I listened intently.

"A-Ah-! Of course, I'm not saying that my words are a hundred



percent accurate. I'm just tossing around some suggestions." Ike panicked upon seeing our absentminded reactions.

"No, Ike-kun. We'll heed your warning. You're saying we should install a temporary shower, right?"

"Mn, I guess so... Some of us are probably fine with sticking to the river, but I'm worried about the frail students catching a cold."

We cannot spend our time boiling the water little by little. We don't have any large containers to store them in the first place. Our clean water should be used exclusively for drinking.

"You're right, Ike. Perhaps we should install one."

"We'll discuss it with everyone so we can decide later."

After Ike and I nodded to Hirata's words, the footsteps of three people could be heard not far from our location.

"Oh, so this is Class B's base, huh?"

"Kanzaki?" I said.

It was Kanzaki Ryuuji of Class C. With him were two other male Class C students; Beppu Ryouta and Hamaguchi Tetsuya.

"It's been a while, Ayanokouji," he greeted.

"What's up?"

"Your base looks pretty nice."

Beppu and Hamaguchi followed suit. I was acquainted with them because of Ichinose. It's also probably the reason why she sent these three to check our base.

"Nice to meet, you. I'm Hirata." Hirata also expressed some basic etiquette with them.

"I'm Ike." And of course, so did Ike.

Kanzaki addressed me after they exchanged pleasantries with the two.

"It looks like things are going well for Class B," he commented while looking at the state of our one-day-old campsite.

"How's Class C doing?"

"Hmm. If we compare ourselves with you guys, we're probably faring with the same amount of comfort."

"We've been tackling the exam with the same types of strategies then."

"I guess so."

"Where's your base camp located?" I asked.

"There are large broken trees along the path from here to the northern beach. If you enter the forest and walk west, you can find our campsite. You shouldn't get lost if use those trees as a guide."

I thought he'd show any sort of hesitation, but Kanzaki answered my question instantly.

"Ichinose told us that you can come by if you want. We'll report what we've seen here so it's all fair if you scout our place in return."



As expected of Ichinose. Even if they were in Class C right now, their abilities as the original Class B are totally showing.

"Alright, I'll come by with some people, if that's okay with you guys."

"Sure." And with that, Kanzaki left with his classmates after bidding us a brief goodbye.

Hirata and Ike gave me a wondering look.

"So you're friends with them, too?" asked Hirata.

"I wouldn't call us friends, to be honest. We haven't talked that much."

"You sure know a lot of people from Class C, Ayanokouji. You're even close with someone like Ichinose. She's such a babe!" said Ike.

"It's not that many, but I guess that's true. Though it would be nice if I can establish some sort of connection with Class A or D."

"Isn't that impossible, though? Class A should be wary of us and Class D is lead by that bastard Ryuen." Ike's expression turned sour.

"I suppose you're right."

2nd Day, 8:00 AM.

Class B finished breakfast as they waited for Chabashira-sensei. A little over 30 minutes after she finished the roll call, two familiar faces entered our base camp's premises.

"Huh? What the hell are you two doing here?!" Ike, who was the first one to react.

They were Komiya Kyougo and Kondou Reo.

"Why are you here?! Is Ryuen also coming here?!" asked Yamauchi.

The displeased looks of Hondou and Miyamoto also greeted the two Class D boys. The sound of their voices echoed throughout our campsite.

"Is everything alright?"

Hirata, Horikita, Kikyuu, and Karuizawa check out the commotion, leading most of the class to their place, including myself and Ibuki.

"Is everything alright?" asked Hirata.

"Aren't those guys from Class D?"

"That's Ryuen's class, right?"

"What are they doing here?"

"Look at them... They're..."

Our classmates started murmuring among themselves, clearly bothered by the presence of class members of the guy who attacked us. Some were irritated by their obvious prodding, but most were just afraid of whatever they were scheming, albeit only slightly.



I noticed something strange between the two of them. I'm sure that the attention of most of us was also captured by those irregularities. Komiya and Kondou were currently stuffing their faces with potato chips and drinking bottles of soda. Not water, but soda.

"Hehh... Seems like you guys have been living frugal lives. As expected from the original defects." said Komiya.

"The hell? Aren't you guys in Class D now? That's rich coming from the current defects!" snapped Ike.

"Oi, oi. Are you really getting arrogant over such a fluke? It's obvious that one of you just figured out the S-System. If we're talking about merits, we're still one class ahead of you. The placements represented by our points mean little when it's this early in the game." Kondou responded in return.

This is pretty bad. It seems like Ryuuen figured out the reason for Class B's ascent much faster than I expected. He's better than I initially thought.

Regardless, Kondou was absolutely right. If I were to pick out the seven best students in Ryuuen's Class D and our Class B and evaluate the class as a whole without those students, I'm sure Class D would come out on top. In the end, it's still too early. Unless every one of our classmates surpasses them in terms of consistent growth, our class will forever be, as they worded it, one class behind them.

"Say that again, Kondou! I'll beat the shit out of you!" yelled Ken.

"Stop it, Ken. Violence means nothing here, especially with Chabashira-sensei nearby..." Akito immediately halted Ken's angry charge.

"Did Ryuuen-kun send you here?" Hirata finally asked the question that everyone wanted an answer to. Instead of being displeased, he was more worried about what they were planning.

"Yeah, obviously. We even have a message from him. He said that if you want to enjoy your summer vacation to the fullest, come to the beach right now. Don't hang back. If you're sick of living like cavemen, then we're happy to share our luxuries."

Ryuuen's *"message"* left all of us confused. Of course, no one bothered asking them to elaborate. At the end of the day, it could just be him trying to provoke us or waste our time.

On Hirata, Karuizawa, and Kikyou's orders, everyone just went back to their chores. Some groups went to the forest to find food and some groups took care of the things in and around the campsite.

The two continued indulging in their food and drinks while walking around outside of our main area. They weren't really being



critical in observing our place. It was more like them to harass us by showing off how good of a life they were living while casually strolling around our base camp.

We obviously felt a bit uncomfortable, but we'd be wasting our time if we confront the two when they're not really doing any harm.

Meanwhile, Ike's group, who were busy fishing, couldn't stand Komiya and Kondou's presence.

"Why are you still here?"

"Yeah, get outta here."

Despite their open hostility, Komiya and Kondou only smirked.

"What? We're not doing anything to disturb you guys. We're just scouting out the place, no?"

"Yeah, it's not like we're restricting you from doing the same thing with us. Any of you are welcome to our place."

Ike and Yamauchi, who were almost screwed up by Class D's actions, could only click their tongues in frustration.

After ten more minutes or so, they decided to call it quits and left.

"I don't think they were looking for me." Ibuki, who was watching the whole thing unfold with me, suddenly spoke.

Komiya and Kondou would still probably notice Ibuki's presence even if they were just walking outside the occupied area, but it seemed like they didn't care about her at all.

"Seems like it. 'Guess they just wanted to harass us," I replied.

Their sudden visit was surely strange. They had chips and soda in hand when they arrived. It should also take more than thirty minutes to come here from the southern beach. There's a big chance that Komiya and Kondou left right before the roll call, which would cost them 10 points.

What was Ryuen thinking? They're just casually burning through their points.

"Kondou and Komiya said something about sharing luxuries. 'Any idea of what they were talking about?" I asked.

If they're living in luxury, then that's practically going against the main method of this exam, which was frugality.

"Who knows... But with their words alone, things might just be heading towards the worst-case scenario that I imagined..." Ibuki replied with a grave expression.

After that, Ibuki headed towards a tree right outside the camp.

Worst-case scenario, huh? I initially wanted to take a hike a bit later, but right now seems like a good time. I'll go ahead and assemble the search party group.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 6.2 - Ryuuen's Game

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"What's the point of asking that when we're already in the middle of the forest?" Horikita answered with a sigh.

"Oh, you're right... My bad."

Well, I guess that's it for my attempt at a conversation.

Even if we knew where we were going, it still took us a little over thirty minutes to reach the southern beach.

"Huh? There's no one here," said Onodera.

"So Komiya and Kondou were just spouting a bunch of bullcrap?" added Okitani.

When we reached the main beach, the only thing that greeted us was the wide area of sand. We could also see the special tent with a lot of computers by the edge, near the dock. This is certainly strange, but Komiya and Kondou didn't seem like they were lying.

"Let's go to the other beach. They're probably there," I suggested.

The five of them nodded in agreement. We headed towards the nearest beach, which was west of this place. We didn't even need to reach the edge of the forest before hearing the excited howls of many students.

"Woohoo!" The first person that captured our attention was a student riding a jet ski without a care in the world.

"Hyah-!"

"Woah!" Meanwhile, other students were happily playing beach volleyball.

Toilets and shower rooms were installed without a problem. They also had a big tarp to block an area against the sunlight. Inside that area were things like barbecue stands, chairs, a parasol, snacks, and drinks. And of course, there were jet skis that whizzed along the shoreline and the volleyball that everyone was using. Cooking, laughter, friendly chats, and fun activities could be seen everywhere. The Class D students were wearing their swimwear while enjoying their time on the beach.

Of course, there were more things to count, but they didn't really matter.

Now, this is a vacation.

Everyone in Class D was having a good time. And of course, my classmates' reactions were to be expected.



"Ehhh...?" Onodera's mouth gaped open.

"What... the heck is this...?" Meanwhile, Makida squinted his eyes in confusion.

"Look at all that stuff... Just how much should these cost them...?" Matsushita surveyed the place while murmuring her calculations.

"Their points are toast..." Okitani shook his head.

Horikita, who was behind us, tugged my shirt lightly.

"Ayanokouji-kun... This is ridiculous..." she said.

"Yeah, it is," I replied.

"All this stuff... Is it even possible? Do you think they're up to something?" asked Horikita.

"Not sure, but we can clearly see how much they're enjoying themselves." I shrugged in response.

I took the lead and headed out towards the beach. Of course, a lot of Class D students noticed our sudden arrival, but they didn't really pay us any mind. One familiar student, Ishizaki Daichi, approached us with a non-hostile expression. I could also see Komiya run in a certain direction after seeing us.

There's a very low chance that Ishizaki intends to harm us in any way. Regardless, my classmates were still on guard.

"Ryuuen-san requests your presence," he said with a stern expression.

"What do you guys think?" I asked.

"I'm interested in learning his intentions," Horikita replied quickly.

"I'm alright with whatever Ayanokouji decides to do," shrugged Makida.

"I don't really know much about Ryuuen, so I'm also quite curious," said Matsushita.

Okitani and Onodera nodded in agreement. With that, the six of us headed towards Ryuuen's place while being guided by Ishizaki.

"Do I still need to keep up the leader act like last time?" Horikita whispered softly, with enough volume so that I could hear her voice with a small lean. Her breath was still very warm but not as warm as before, back when we were still on the ship.

"Nah. You can talk to him if you want, but I'll take the lead this time. I don't really care if he thinks I'm Class B's true leader or anything like that."

"I see."

The smell of deliciously cooked meat wafted by our noses. As we tread across the sand and approach the ocean, our group finally reached the man in command of this hedonistic paradise, Ryuuen Kakeru.

"Such a big entourage," he commented upon seeing us.



"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Ryuuen."

"Ayanokouji? Why's Suzune behind you? Is she that shy to see me in my swimwear? I didn't expect her to have such a pure and adorable side." Ryuuen verbally provoked Horikita in an instant.

"I don't allow incompetent people to call me by my first name. It would be great if you could stop, Ryuuen-kun," she replied.

Sensing the pressure, the other four chose to stay silent.

"You can scout around the place if you want. Just don't wander off too far or you might get lost."

"Alright, Ayanokouji. We'll check out the rest of the forest and take note of any interesting areas," replied Okitani.

The four of them headed towards the direction of the forest. Matsushita turned to me with a worried expression before looking back ahead.

"Ohoh? You could've let your friends enjoy themselves out here. We're ready to share the fun, you know?" Ryuuen said before eyeing me with a sharp gaze. "And would you look at that? It seems like you're the one calling the shots, Ayanokouji. Those four immediately obeyed your orders... I thought Suzune was your leader. Was it all an act?"

As expected, he's starting to catch on. Not that it matters.

"You can think whatever you want. We're just here to ask you about... this." My eyes darted around indicating my subject.

"Hoh? You're willing to exchange information?" Ryuuen asked with a big smile.

"Not really. If you want something in return, then we'll just go ahead and leave."

"Hahaha! Oh, don't be like that, Ayanokouji. I'm still willing to answer your questions, you know? After all, even if you decide to say anything, they'd be useless to me. It doesn't matter whether you open your mouth or not."

"Don't worry about that. I'm not interested in telling you anything. I'll gladly take a one-sided conversation."

"Alright, fine," he smirked. "You wanna know about this place, right?"

"Yeah."

"Kuku," he chuckled. "As you can see, we're having a vacation."

"Oh, we can certainly see that. It's quite the high life for a summer vacation."

Horikita rolled her eyes while listening to our conversation.

"How many points did you spend on all of this?" she asked.

"Hmm... Well, I got lazy, so I can't remember the exact number. It didn't really matter." Ryuuen nonchalantly answered her.

Just from a quick look, this stuff would probably cost more than



150 points.

"It seems like you have your own ideas on how to tackle this test."

"Oh, of course, I do. Are you one of them, too? Those Class C charlatans, I mean?" Ryuuken asked with a snicker.

Ah, so that's why Class D wasn't too surprised about our arrival. Some Class C students were just here, I assume.

"Maybe we're similar, but I don't think we're the same," I answered cryptically. "Why do you ask?"

"Keh, they blabbered some pretty boring stuff-- about how this test is about perseverance, ingenuity, and cooperation."

That's probably something that Horikita would wholeheartedly agree on.

"I guess that's also another way to look at it," I replied.

"Cut the crap, Ayanokouji. My guys just visited your base. You're pretty much the same as those clowns."

So they still observed the place to some degree.

"It's not like we have a choice. If anyone suggested a plan like yours, the class would erupt into chaos."

"That just goes to show how shitty the other classes' leaders are. They can't even get everyone in line. Look at how happy my class is. They're getting the summer vacation they deserve because of my plan."

"You're a fool. As Class D, you're already at the bottom. This so-called plan of yours will only hurt you in the long run," Horikita suddenly spoke out. She couldn't comprehend the utter stupidity of Ryuuken's plan.

"A fool, huh? Are you talking about me?" Ryuuken grabbed his bottle of water. "That's quite funny, Suzune. To me, the ones who can't even think outside the box are the fools."

She didn't buy it. At least, that's what it looked like on the surface. But knowing Horikita, I'm sure Ryuuken's words cast some doubts in her mind. She purposefully acted offended by his decisions with the hopes of getting more information.

"Ishizaki, take this and get me some cold water," Ryuuken called out.

Ishizaki, who was playing beach volleyball, instantly ran out of the court and followed Ryuuken's orders.

At that moment, I noticed something strange. There wasn't anything else on top of the table, apart from the bottle. Because of the heat and the table's uneven placement, the condensed cold air would've made a straight water trail...

However, before dripping off the surface, the water formed a certain shape most likely due to adhesion.

"Aren't you being quite laughable right now, Suzune? People are



selfish by nature. Preaching me about useless crap like cooperation is stupid, to say the least. After all, everyone lies. Relationships built on trust aren't viable. You can only trust yourself," he said.

"That's not the kind of answer I'd expect to hear from someone who declared war on us," she replied.

Ishizaki returned with a new bottle of cold water.

"Let me tell you something about myself then." Ryuen opened the bottle and drank lightly. "I absolutely hate hard work. Patience? Saving? You must be joking. Boring methods aren't part of my arsenal."

"Hmph, our results in this exam will heavily rely on how well each leader can bring the class together. You're not even trying."

"Oh? Leader, huh? Are you Class B's leader, Suzune? Or perhaps it's Ayanokouji?"

"It depends on your definition of 'leader'. If it's the one who claims the rights of exclusive possession, then we'll have to keep our mouths shut," I replied.

"Heh, so you're at least one of the two?"

"Class B doesn't have a single leader, Ryuen. I may call the shots at times, but Horikita or Hirata's roles are just as important as mine. Uniting the class is a group effort. After all, we don't have someone like Ichinose."

"That girl? Pah, a pacifist like Ichinose isn't worth the talk. I can crush her anytime I want." Ryuen relaxingly resigned to his seat with a shrug.

This seems like a good time to ask about the other problem.

"By the way, Ibuki's part of your class, right?"

"Hm? Ibuki, huh? Yeah, she's in my class. Why do you ask?" Ryuen gave me a side glance.

"She's been staying at our camp since last night. Her face is swollen, too. Did you do that to her?"

"Haha, so she wound up in your place? What a pathetic girl," he chuckled. "Listen, Ayanokouji. A ruler has no need for subordinates who disobey orders. We determined that I would use the class's points to my liking. Once I said the word, it's become an undeniable fact. Revolting against the ruler is pointless."

"In other words, Ibuki-san clashed with you because she didn't want to waste points," said Horikita.

"Well, you could say that. That's why I gave her a light punishment." Ryuen made a slapping gesture which confirmed how he was involved in the matter. "Another boy defied me, as well. He was driven out like Ibuki, so I initially thought they'd be eating grass and insects together. Seems like that isn't the case."

"Seeing how indifferent you are to their absence, Class D's points



have been entirely spent, haven't they?"

My conclusion made Horikita's eyebrows twitch.

"You're right, I've spent all of them, down to the very last point," Ryuuen replied with a smirk.

This was Ryuuen's strategy. He didn't need to look for missing classmates nor worry about the roll calls if they were already at zero points. Spending everything didn't only make their vacation convivial and extravagant-- most of the test's negative elements were nullified, too.

"Such short-sighted thinking. You may get to have fun now, but what will you do afterward?" asked Horikita.

"I wonder? You're smart, aren't you, Suzune? Why don't you think of a plan for me?"

Horikita ignored him with a stare.

"Kukuku. In the end, plain, ordinary people can only engage in plain, ordinary thinking. It's funny how desperate you lot are in trying to protect the points you've been given. Occupying spots, looking out for other classes' leaders, running around the forest for food and shelter-- How worthless."

"Did you even choose a leader for your class?" I asked.

"Oh, good question. I remember one of my classmates getting called out by Sakagami-sensei last night. 'Must've been the one who got randomly assigned,' he scoffed.

Horikita shook her head and turned around.

"Let's head back, Ayanokouji-kun. Talking to him makes me feel ill."

"Well, you heard her, Ryuuen. It would be nice to chill out in this place, but we have things to do. Enjoy your zero points, I guess."

"Don't sweat it, Ayanokouji. The one who orchestrated those recordings should be a fine opponent. It doesn't matter whether it's you, Suzune, Hirata, or anyone in your class. I'll crush each and every one of you all the same."

Those are some aggressive words.

"It's a pity that the '*favor*' from our contract is unusable in this exam, but having a nice card on standby feels reassuring." It's brief, but rubbing some salt on his wounds should do for now.

Ryuuen's smile turned sinister. Seems like he wasn't fond of my response. After all, he was reminded of his loss.

Horikita and I left the premises and waited for the others beside a marked tree.

I saw the cruise ship which was slightly visible from our place. I saw the students of Class D eating and stockpiling food. They were all spending their time on recreational and fun outdoor activities.

"How substandard. Class D's self-destruction will only help us."



"It's a pretty nice strategy, in my opinion. If future class points didn't matter to them, then spending everything should be the best course of action," I said.

"What do you mean? They won't last a day after this, will they?"

"You're right. The school knows that, too. What do you think will happen then?"

The moment I asked that question, Horikita gasped after realizing something.

"They'll do what Kouenji-kun did..."

That's right. They're not even two whole days into the exam and Class D will already retire to continue enjoying their vacation back at the ship. Ryuen's classmates must've been happy. They didn't even need to experience a single ounce of hardship.

"Well, whether the school will allow them to retire all at once is unknown."

"That's true, but it's not like sickness is the only reason they can give."

"Yeah, physical condition, mental instability-- There is a multitude of reasons to retire."

I've gained more understanding of how Ryuen thinks after that visit. He's tackling this exam with a completely different mindset. That in itself is dangerous enough... To him, it's like a...

"Horikita..."

"What is it?"

"What do you think about Ryuen's actions?"

"I already told you, right? It's ridiculous. He's totally treating this like a *game*."

"You're right. I don't know how careful we should be, moving forward." I sighed lightly before continuing. "All of us this could be a part of his true plan."

"True plan? Do you have any other ideas?"

"I hope I do, to be honest..." I shook my head apologetically.

It's never too late to let one's guard down. All of us are players, too. If we make a mistake, we might just realize that we're actually playing his game-- Ryuen's game, that is.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 7.1 - Resolve to Protect

Deep into the forest, Makida and I guided the other four towards Class C's campsite. While I know the general direction of their place based on Kanzaki's instructions, Makida apparently found the path leading there.

"It's just around here," he said.

"By the way, Ayanokouji-kun. We found some fruits while running around the forest, but you told us to keep our bags as vacant as possible. Is there any reason for that?" asked Onodera.

"Ah, that..."

"Will the peeps from Class C give us some stuff or something?" added Okitani.

"Hmm... Maybe you guys will understand when we get to it. But for now, I can tell you that we're not getting physical things from Class C. Just information," I explained as they nodded in response.

After passing through the large tree stumps, we finally reached the pathway that Makida was talking about. I noticed that those broken trees were intentionally cut that way-- most likely for landmarking purposes. It really gives you the feeling that a spot is nearby.

Regardless, tracks of people could be noticed along the soil. If we walk a little farther, Class C's campsite should be waiting for us.

"It's a shame that I didn't get to talk to Ryuuen-kun myself. But, to be honest, I'd rather familiarize the forest than stay there just to get intimidated by the pressure," said Matsushita, who was walking side by side with me.

"Well, Ryuuen is pretty intimidating, but you should probably get used to it. Most of the tutors should be as composed and cool-headed as Horikita. After all, our academic achievers and class spokespersons are Ryuuen's main targets," I replied.

"Really? Talk about scary... Well, it didn't really matter. I kinda got what sort of person Ryuuen-kun was just by hearing his brief exchange with Horikita-san." Matsushita shrugged with a smile.

"Ehhh, nothing less from the one who's been relentlessly waging psychological warfare against me." I looked at her with a smirk.

After hearing my response, Matsushita froze in place. I continued walking as if nothing happened. I basically said that I was always aware of the mind games, straight to her face. She must've been



really alarmed internally, and I found that reaction of hers to be quite amusing.

I could barely hear Onodera ask her "What's the problem?" as she replied with a simple "Nothing, it's alright." before laughing wryly.

As I tread further, it didn't even take half a minute before we finally reached Class C's base camp.

"Woah..."

"Class C is amazing."

"Their base looks really nice!"

"Look at those hammocks."

"It seems like they've even exceeded our expectations," said Horikita.

"Yeah, I guess this is what you'd expect from the original Class B," I replied.

It's a really well-made campsite that prioritizes efficiency and practicality.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san, you're here!" As expected, Ichinose was there to receive us. Seeing her approach us with a bright and beautiful smile, we, of Class B, instantly felt welcome.

"Hi there, I'm Ichinose Honami. Nice to meet you." Ichinose introduced herself to my classmates without hesitation.

While Matsushita and Onodera were excited to finally meet her, Makida and Okitani got inevitably flustered. Getting to speak with the Ichinose Honami of Class C must've felt incredible for them. After all, one might argue that she's the most popular first-year student alongside Kikyō.

"You guys seem to be doing pretty well," I said.

"Ahaha, I guess so. It was all thanks to my classmates' efforts. It was really hard at first, but we made it work somehow," she replied with a smile.

"Horikita, can you discuss our class's point usage with Kanzaki?" I asked, before turning towards the other four. "You guys should listen in, as well. In the meantime, I'll discuss some things with Ichinose regarding the other classes."

They didn't seem surprised by my instructions. A small conclave between two leaders shouldn't be out of the ordinary.

"Is that okay with you, Ichinose?" I asked.

"Oh, sure," she nodded before calling out to some of her classmates. "Kanzaki-kun, Yume-chan, Sayo-chan! Can I ask you to guide Horikita-san and her friends around the camp?"

The three seemed to be helping some students with setting up a new bonfire pit. I guess their roles are independent like Hirata, Horikita, or me.

"Sure thing, Ichinose," Kanzaki agreed without any complaints.



"Ah, isn't that Ayanokouji-kun? Hey there!" Andou smilingly waved at me. Of course, I responded in kind, albeit without the smile. I didn't see Minamikata or Amikura with her so they must be doing their tasks elsewhere.

"I'll be counting on you guys to report what you've learned. Horikita, don't leave out any details. Tell them everything we've done thus far." Of course, we'd omit the part where we reveal our assigned leader.

"I understand. Leave it to me," she nodded.

As they walked into the main area of the campsite, Ichinose and I proceeded towards the forest.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah, I haven't talked to you since before the finals," I replied.

"We chat online pretty frequently, though," she chuckled.

"Ah, you're right."

Our friendly exchange set up a nice and informal atmosphere.

"You guys popped out from an unexpected part of the forest. Let me guess; you came from the beach, didn't you?" she asked with a grin.

"Yeah, specifically, from Ryuen's camp."

"Ahh, I thought so. They're pretty crazy, aren't they?"

The two of us approached an outlying hammock suspended between two trees.

"This place is out of the camp. Why are there a couple of hammocks set up?" I asked.

"Yonezu-kun and Shibata-kun are staying here. They said something about guarding this pathway against possible intruders," she replied.

To be honest, this is a nice place to stand guard. The atmosphere isn't too hot, and the trees are easy to climb. And apart from people, they must also be wary of animals.

"Wanna sit?" she offered.

"I'm fine."

"Alright then."

After I declined, Ichinose decided to sit on Yonezu's hammock herself.

"It's a nice fit for one person," I commented.

"If you try hard enough, two people can sit here, you know?"

Ichinose inched sideward as if to free up some space. She patted the small area beside her while looking at me.

"We'll be squeezed together if I sit with you. Don't you think people would find that to be a bit inappropriate if they see us?" I scratched my head, acting a bit embarrassed.

Knowing how smart Ichinose was, it's possible that she's just



trying to tease me. But if she wasn't, then I guess it's her airheadedness doing work. She definitely has those tendencies sometimes.

"Ahaha~! I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Geez, you didn't have to be so flustered, Ayanokouji-kun." Ichinose waved her hand with a chuckle.

Her pinkish cheeks indicated that she didn't know the implications of her previous words until I pointed them out. Or at least, that's what I got from observing her.

The effect of my conversation with Matsushita is making me feel disgusted with myself. I'm being too self-conscious with what girls think of me as if I'm hot stuff... Might as well progress the conversation.

"So, what did you think about Ryuuen's actions?" I asked.

Those guarded eyes indicated that Ichinose was in leader mode now. The casual chat was over.

"To be honest, I can't really say anything else. I wasn't there, so I would base my opinion on my classmates' descriptions. From what I can tell, it seems like they spent most of their points on the first day."

"They most likely did. I don't know how much we can trust Ryuuen's words, but he told us that they've spent all of their points as of earlier."

"Everything?" Ichinose winced in confusion.

"Yeah."

"What will they do after that?"

"Well, one of our classmates, Kouenji, retired on his own."

"Eh? Is he alright? Also, your class should've gotten the penalty for it, right?"

Hearing me say something that didn't have anything in relation to our topic on the surface must've made the cogs in Ichinose's brain turn.

"Yeah, he didn't even tell us. According to Chabashira-sensei, Kouenji stated that he felt unwell. We scouted out the forest together yesterday and that wasn't the case at all."

"That sounds pretty rough..."

"Well, he managed to do it despite *feigning* sickness."

"So you think Ryuuen-kun will do the same after their beach party is over, right?"

Ichinose's unsurprised expression told me that she had already come to that conclusion before I even finished.

"Exactly. They're pretty much out of the race now. If Class D doesn't retire, none of them will last until the final day."

I turned towards their base camp which fundamentally looked



different from ours. However, it had the same cozy feeling to it.

"You've been leading your class well, Ichinose."

"For now, I guess. I considered everyone's opinions and thankfully, some of the kids in our class are familiar with the outdoors. They were lifesavers, to be honest. I can't simply take the credit."

"But they managed to get their thoughts out properly because you rallied everyone together."

"Isn't that the same with Class B, then? You're their leader, right?"

"I mean, I guess I am. But my role isn't the same as yours. If it's getting the class united, Hirata's the man on the job. I don't have the same type of charisma that he has."

"Oh, you've talked about him before. Some girls in my class have a crush on him."

"That's to be expected. He's Hirata, after all."

"You respect him a lot, huh?"

"I do. He's a role model for me, especially with social interactions."

"You're great at talking, though. You're a good listener, too."

To be honest, it's not that I'm a good listener. I just subconsciously analyze the other person's problems and present possible solutions. I can't really connect with them emphatically, which is generally what a genuinely good listener should be.

I have a lot of friends, but that's because I was leading the class from the forefront. Engaging with everyone was necessary. I can't manually befriend each person like how Kikyou, Hirata, and Ichinose do it. I'm not at their level in terms of social skills.

"Pardon me, Ichinose-san? I'm sorry to interrupt. Do you know where Nakanishi-kun is?" asked a male student in a rather reserved voice.

Ichinose and I heard his footsteps, but we didn't really see him until he reached our location.

Class D's Kaneda Satoru. The moment I saw him, some things started to become clear.

"Ah, Kaneda-kun. I think Nakanishi-kun headed down to the northern shore. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I'd offer help. Is that unnecessary?"

"Oh no, not at all. I'm really happy that you feel that way. Can you head over and follow Chihiro-chan's group then? If you tell them I told you to do so, it'll be okay."

"Okay, thank you very much."

And with that, the student headed off in another direction.

"Hmm..."

"Are you curious? That's actually Kaneda-kun, from Class D. I



haven't asked him about his initial situation yet, but apparently, he'd been in some kind of dispute with Ryuuken-kun. When we found him wandering around the forest, he said he'd get by on his own, but I couldn't just leave him."

Seeing my pondering expression, Ichinose filled me in on the details.

"I see, it's just as Ryuuken told us then."

"Oh, do you know something about him?"

"Well, our class also picked up a Class D student yesterday."

I told Ichinose about Ryuuken's clash with Ibuki and how we let her stay in our base camp.

"Ahh, I see... Kaneda-kun had a bruise on his face, too. It seems like they couldn't do anything to resist Ryuuken-kun's tyranny."

It was a show of straight-up violence. Despite her lighthearted tone, Ichinose's eyes hardened as if strengthening her resolve to protect her classmates.

"Well, if Class D really does retire, Kaneda and Ibuki can just retire with them."

"That's true. Even if they end up with zero points, at least they don't have to feel out of place by staying on the island with another class. They can just enjoy themselves back at the ship. Ahh~, how enviable."

While the two of us observed the Class C campsite from a distance, I took the chance to ask her about Class A.

"Hm? You wanna know about Class A?"

"Well, any information about them would help, I guess."

They've probably taken control of the western part of the island. The most noticeable and obvious location that will surely be related to them is that cave. If their strategy was to explore the entirety of the island's western region, that cornfield might remain untouched until today or even tomorrow. However, it's also possible for them to come across it. It's also why I chose to stay silent, only telling Horikita about the corns. I didn't want to keep the class's hopes up only to find out that Class A had already harvested everything. I couldn't really rush with taking over it when our base was just barely functioning.

"Well, if you go back south, you'll notice an opening heading west. Turn right there and head straight to reach the cave. If they haven't found a better place to camp, that's probably where their base is."

"Ohh, I see. Have you noticed anything about them?"

"Hmm... Well, I went there myself to investigate, but I don't know for sure. It's because they're so thoroughly defensive... or rather, secretive."



"Secretive?"

"I can't really explain it. If you go there yourselves, then you might get what I'm saying."

"That's true. Thank you, Ichinose."

"Ahaha, it's fine. I didn't really know anything too useful. In fact, I think Class C is actually on the receiving end of the help. I should be the one thanking you guys."

"Well, Even if we're in different classes, being in a cooperative relationship isn't too bad. Worrying about one less class is better than seeing everyone as enemies."

"You're right! My classmates also see you guys as allies. But of course, if we're pitted against each other in a direct competition, we won't back down, you know?"

"It's the same with us. We won't be defeated easily," I nodded.

"Well, for now, I guess I can offer you a suggestion."

Hearing those words, Ichinose nodded with an understanding smile.

"This is about the additional rules, isn't it?"

"It seems like we were thinking of the same things."

"Yeah... To be honest, it would be nice if we could find out other classes' assigned leaders. But after some thinking, I figured that it was just too risky. There really isn't any other definitive method to go about that rule without engaging in espionage or deception."

"So, what do you say? Does a truce sound good?"

"Sure! I think it's better to protect those 50 points for now."

We chatted for a few more minutes before getting back inside the camp. Apparently, the representatives of Class B and C were finished deliberating information.

"How did it go?"

"We've gotten a lot of useful knowledge!" Onodera exclaimed with a grin.

"We have to thank everyone from Class B, too. What you've shared with us will be very helpful." Kobashi nodded while expressing her gratitude.

"It seems like it went well, Ayanokouji-kun." Ichinose smilingly nudged me with her elbow.

"Yeah, thanks a lot. We've taken too much of your time, Ichinose. We'll go ahead now."

"Alright! Come by if you need anything!" Ichinose waved happily.

"Thank you, Horikita-san, and the rest of you," nodded Kanzaki.

"Bye-bye, Ayanokouji-kun and all of you!" Andou's arms swayed enthusiastically.

The six of us bid them a short farewell before heading outside of the premises.



"We've obtained some practical intel, Ayanokouji-kun. Do you want to hear about them while we walk?" asked Horikita.

"Hmm... Alright. But, I think we need to make good use of our time. I want the five of you to go back and share everything with Hirata's group. While you guys do that, I'll investigate Class A's whereabouts."

Their expressions turned serious as soon as I mentioned Class A. As the class behind them, they were our greatest obstacle to our goal in this school.

"Do you want us to go now?" asked Makida.

"Not yet. We'll head somewhere else before you guys go back."

If one's class is coordinated, they might be able to get everything in order during the second day, at best. Since the cornfields were basically in the center of the island, it's just a matter of time before either of the classes stumbles upon it.

Horikita and the others summarized what they'd learned from Class C.

They made use of the well, which was the main lifeline of their base camp. It was an invaluable asset for their bathing and drinking water.

They've spent 70 points in total on some standard items. Using the dense amount of trees, they've converted their need for more tents into hammocks instead. Apart from the Hammocks, what interested us more was their purchase of a Water Shower. It cost 15 points which was 5 points cheaper than the Shower Room (or Temporary Shower).

They found an area with good vegetation where both fruits and vegetables grew in numbers and used the nearby beach to catch fish. Not only that, their use of the vinyl sheets was much more practical than our idea. Apparently, they just stacked them on top and next to each other to make a mat that was basically the same as ours. However, since their vinyl sheets would end up untouched, Class C could just return them without a problem.

"And lastly, they've also sprinkled water around their base to counteract the heat," said Matsushita.

And with that, their report was finished.

"I see... Then I guess it's better if we hurry up then. We'll be able to save 5 points if we can inform Hirata about this. We were actually planning to buy a shower room, but a water shower would be the better option since we have a lot of natural water."

As they nodded in agreement, we finally set foot on the path that Kouenji and I took yesterday.

"Is there anything special here, Ayanokouji?" asked Okitani.

"Well, it would be very hard for anyone to notice what's out of



place at first glance," I replied.

Even Horikita and Matsushita were looking around with a difficult expression. After they followed me towards a wall of tall grass, Horikita finally realized what was going on. She must've remembered our conversation from yesterday.

When we busted through the array of thick bushes, a new variety of greenery with a mix of yellow finally entered our eyesight.

"Woah, look at this!"

"It's corn!"

Phew. As expected, it seems like no one has found this place yet. If I were to take Class D out of the equation, Class A would be busy with exploring the western region and Class C would have the hardest time coming here since they'll have to go around the mountain.

"This was the place that you told me about yesterday, right?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah, it seems like no one has found it yet," I replied.

Okitani and Makida approached me excitedly.

"There are fifty-two ears of corn in here, Ayanokouji."

"Our bags should be more than enough to carry all of these!"

We harvested the corn with great vigor. I left my share of the load unharvested since I'll be returning here later after visiting Class A. After taking everything, it was finally time for us to split up.

"Ayanokouji-kun," Matsushita called out. "Can I come with you instead? I promise not to drag you down."

Horikita didn't react in any particular way, but the other three were relatively surprised. Normally, something like this would have a romantic connotation whereas Matsushita's main reason for asking this was because she likes me. It's not strange for Onodera and the others to think that. Of course, Matsushita should expect reactions like this before asking me.

If she didn't care about the consequences, then this might also mean that I was the guy she was talking about earlier.

However, if I were to eliminate those thoughts, there's a big chance that Matsushita might've just wanted to learn about Class A's situation firsthand. Yeah... You know what, let's just go with that... I'll stop the disgustingly self-conscious thoughts.

Alright, c'mon Matsushita, clear things up before any misunderstandings form.

Uh... Matsushita...?

I waited a few seconds for Matsushita to justify herself, but she chose to stay silent instead.

What is this girl-- Is she actually...

...



Alright, I'm overthinking this. I'm getting way too mentally stressed by her words and actions. I'll just say yes and move on.

"Ohh, sure. But you should probably empty your bag before we leave," I replied.

"Alright! I wanted to check out Class A for myself, too. I wonder how the 'strongest class' is doing?" Matsushita approached me with an audacious smirk. It was utterly audacious.

At that point, I understood what just happened.

"You have one copy of the map, right?" I asked Horikita.

"Yes, we'll be fine on the way back. You and Matsushita-san should be careful as well."

"We will~! Goodbye, everyone! We'll see you later."

And with that, Matsushita and I were left all alone in this artificially cultivated cornfield.

She stared at me while raising an eyebrow. Matsushita was currently wearing what most people would call a '*shit-eating grin*'. Well, I say that, but she still looked incredibly pretty with that smile.

"Alright, alright, you win this time, Matsushita." I raised my arms in resignation.

"Hehh~... Well, to be honest, I wouldn't really call that a win. Your expression was as calm as ever," she pouted.

"But I'll still admit, my mind was quite panicked because of you."

"Ehe~, I got you there, huh?"

"Yes, yes. 1 point for you, 28 points for me," I teased back.

"W-W-W-Wha-?! Y-You counted all of them-?! You were that into it?! Are you thinking about our conversations every time? Do you like me or something?" Matsushita's composure instantly cracked.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Matsushita. I just subconsciously remembered," I shrugged.

"Liar! There's no way someone would remember those details vividly if it wasn't stuck in their head. And it's not even clear whether we're engaged in psychological warfare, you know?" she protested.

I adjusted my bag and walked towards the path to the cave.

"H-Hey, wait for me, Ayanokouji-kun!"

Matsushita was actually right, in a sense. I wasn't really '*into it*' per se. I just find our conversations interesting most of the time. And every time she tries to break my cool, I always have a little bit of fun flipping her attempts right back at her. That's why those moments are pretty much etched into my mind.

But of course, I wouldn't tell her that.



*Author's Notes:*

*In the LN, Kiyotaka and Airi, along with Katsuragi and Yahiko found the cornfield on the third day.*



## Vol. 3: Chapter 7.1.2 - Your Type, My Type

"Ayanokouji-kun... Have you ever, like, smiled?" Matsushita asked me out of nowhere.

"I've smiled a lot in the past, you know? Everyone in our class has seen me smile, including you. And also, I just smirked at you last time, didn't I?" I replied.

"Sure, we've seen you smile forcefully and we've seen you smile bitterly, too. But, those two and smirks are entirely different from a *smile*." Matsushita started gesturing joyfully as if she was trying to present me something. "I'm talking about a genuinely happy smile~!"

A genuinely happy smile, huh? Have I not done that before? Well, I'm certainly not the type of person who would do that every day like how most people do.

"Not only that. You also never panic, and your composure never breaks. Is that how you were from the start? Or did you grow up in such a scary place that everything just seems tame to you?"

Matsushita's theories were hitting closer and closer to home. Though, I can't really blame her. As soon as I decided to show my abilities, I knew I would attract attention. And of course, given my personality, the people around me would take interest in my past.

When I did my research, I was incredibly fascinated by some works of fiction. There were a lot of stories depicting characters with similar origins as I am. It wouldn't be strange if a random person could describe a place like the White Room.

However, even if I were to tell them the truth, no one would take me seriously. It's almost a year and a half since I've been out of that place. I'm starting to get a gist of how the outside world works, and something like the White Room does not fall under the category of normal. It's not something that I could easily share with others.

"Well, who knows? Maybe you're right. People develop their personalities based on the influence of their environment, after all."

"Yeah, that's true. Ah-! Speaking of which, what were you like as a child, Ayanokouji-kun?"

*A specimen.*

*White floors, white walls, white ceilings, white uniforms, and white*



*gowns. Tests, exercises, lessons, tests, tests, tests, tests...*

"I was certainly a strange child-- isolated as if I was some sort of weirdo."

"Ohh, I was expecting some fancy answer; like how you were once an upbeat and cheerful young boy until something happened that made you become an emotionless and empty husk... or something like that," Matsushita declaimed with passion.

"That's... quite a specific scenario. And I'm not like that, you know?"

"I know. Even with your deadpan face, you're still quite the goofster sometimes. It was just a common trope in stories," she shrugged.

"I figured," I shrugged back.

"But why were you isolated? I'm guessing that it's something along the lines of you being a Japanese kid. Did it bother you at all?"

"I didn't know any better, and I never really cared about friends as long as I showed passing results in school. Being alone didn't bother me at all because I had my hobbies."

I've established myself as a returnee from America, but I left it at that since I want to avoid piling up on lies, as much as possible. I've presented myself as someone who's reticent about himself, so no one has really tried to pry.

"Well, you definitely could've been a star student back then if you tried even a little bit, right? How popular would that make you, I wonder? You might've even gotten a girlfriend in junior high. Isn't that amazing? An American girlfriend~..."

For some reason, Matsushita started fantasizing about some weird stuff.

"Oh, speaking of girlfriends, you're not into Kushida-san or Horikita-san, right? And based on what you've said earlier, I can assume that you don't have a crush on Ichinose-san, too."

"Huh? Ah, yeah."

As expected of Matsushita. She easily managed to bring up the topic she wants before I can do anything about it.

"Ohh, I see. Then, is it alright if I ask what kind of girl you like?"

That question, huh...? I've been asked about it a lot, especially by Karuizawa and her friends.

"Well, I guess I should apologize now. Apparently, my answer belongs in the '*inexperienced*' category."

"Ah... As expected, a lot of the girls have already asked you this question." Matsushita gave me an understanding nod. "But '*inexperienced*', huh? What in the world did you tell them?"

I gave her a side glance before answering.



"Spirited."

"Pfft-"

"Oi."

"S-Sorry, Ayanokouji-kun... Now I understand why they called you inexperienced."

"I know what you're thinking, and it's a misunderstanding. I'm not so ignorant to think that there are only two types of girls..." I explained.

Specifically; the Spirited type and the Quiet type.

"Woah, amazing! You really knew what's on my mind~!"

"Karuizawa already told me the exact same thing. I really needed to elaborate on it more," I said. "Basically, my personality is like this, right? I just thought it would be nice if I can go out with someone who's kind of the opposite."

The main flaw of my answer was how utterly universal it was. Most girls would probably consider themselves to be spirited.

"Hmm, that makes sense."

"How about you, Matsushita? What type of guy do you like?"

"Hoh~? Are you curious? Will you treat it as a reference to make me like you, perhaps?"

"Be thankful that I was considerate. I could've asked you the same thing earlier, you know?" I rolled my eyes with a sigh.

"Ahaha~! I'm kidding, I'm kidding," Matsushita chuckled. "Well, for starters, I want them to be someone mature. I'm not really into childish boys like Yamauchi-kun or Onizuka-kun. And besides, it's really endearing when a reliable boy shows his vulnerable side. It makes me want to hug him."

A hug from Matsushita.

Objectively speaking, Matsushita's description of her ideal guy sounds a lot like me. However, there's no way I'd tell her that. Just thinking about it makes me gag internally. Man, being overly self-conscious is a damn nightmare.

"Mature and reliable, huh? Basically, someone like... Hirata?"

Matsushita put her hand in front of her face and lightly giggled.

"Yes, yes. Someone like Hirata-kun," she said sarcastically.

"Oi, why do I feel like you're making fun of me? Did I say something wrong?"

"Nothing, it's really nothing~!" Matsushita smilingly shook her head. "Well, most of my friends would say that I might be into upperclassmen, but I don't think that's the case at all. I actually don't mind dating someone in our year, you know?"

Matsushita was what I would describe as a *"high-class girl"*. She came from a relatively well-off family and her academic achievements were stellar. Growing up in a very healthy



environment, Matsushita was someone that didn't have any glaring flaws apart from her laid-back and carefree attitude.

There was nothing that I could capitalize on.

There's no way she would settle for less when it comes to a romantic partner. And to be honest, she has every ground to be choosy. First of all, she was smart and beautiful. While her involvement in the class wasn't as apparent as Horikita and Hirata, Matsushita is still a vital part of the class. If she had any leadership skills like those two, she can certainly stand toe-to-toe with them. And lastly, even if she wasn't as popular as Kikyuu, Matsushita gets along with everyone in the class while also being admired by many outside.

"Slow down, Matsushita. We're almost there."

As she nodded, the scenery started to shift slowly. We're about to reach our destination.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 7.2 - Misjudge

We saw a cave opening that looked like it cut deep into the mountainside. There were two temporary toilets and one shower room near the entrance, and a few students stood guard, surveying their surroundings with stern expressions.

So this is Class A's base camp, huh?

"We can't really see what's inside from here..." muttered Matsushita.

After observing the surrounding terrain, I've concluded that it was simply impossible to look around without getting spotted.

"Let's just approach them. What's the worst that could happen?"

Matsushita nodded nervously.

"Huh? Who are you? You're not from our class." A male student called out as soon as he saw us.

He was Totsuka Yahiko. According to Kikyuu, Totsuka is the closest and most loyal student under Katsuragi. I don't know if she meant that they were close friends or if Totsuka just wanted to be under Katsuragi's leadership.

"I'm Ayanokouji, from Class B," I said.

"I'm Matsushita, from Class B, as well," followed Matsushita.

"Ah, I remember you from the ship. I don't know who this girl is, though."

"I'm just his classmate. Nice to meet you, uh..."

"I'm Totsuka Yahiko, of Class A."

"Oh, Totsuka-kun, is it?"

"What are you two doing around here?" he asked vigilantly.

"We were scouting out the area. It seems like Class A has their own ways of doing things, huh?" I replied.

It would've been a win if I could catch a glimpse of the cave's inside, but a big vinyl tarp covered the entrance.

So this was what Ichinose meant by Class A being "*secretive*".

"Well, there's nothing to see here. It's better if you guys leave."

The other students guarding the place looked weary as they glared at us.

"Is there anything weird inside? Why are you guys covering the entrance? It's going to be really dark, you know?"

They'd need another light source, regardless. But using natural light during the day to save up a lantern's usage capacity would've



been the better option. Covering up the entrance like this is strange, no matter how you look at it.

"That's... none of your business." He reluctantly replied with a flustered expression.

Matsushita was a pretty girl. It would make sense if Totsuka hesitates in responding rudely.

"This place is a spot, right? Is there a device inside? Our place had some sort of device, too." I asked.

"That's- Well..." Totsuka started getting tongue-tied.

He would only get more aggressive if I acted smart and overbearing. By dumbing myself down for a bit while asking gently, he'd see my questions as genuine attempts to exchange information.

"Ah! Like the mechanism thingy that we saw, right? Does your cave have one, too?" Matsushita asked with an innocently cute expression.

Nice follow-up. She understood what I was trying to do.

"W-Well, this place is... occupied by Class A right now. You guys can't..."

It was pretty obvious, but at least we could finally confirm it. This place was indeed a spot.

"Ohh, I see. We're not really trying to barge in. Is the space inside big enough for all of you?" I asked.

"Yeah..."

"It's the second day, right? Have you guys bought any stuff with your points?" followed Matsushita.

"T-That's..."

"If I remember correctly, you only had 270 points at the start. Are you guys doing alright in terms of spendings?"

With the guise of kind and innocent curiosity, Matsushita and I barraged him with questions.

"Ah-- It's fine if you can't answer us. Our class was having a tough time. We were just trying to check out if the others were doing alright." With a smile to finish it, Matsushita might've just broken through Totsuka's defense.

The other students had anxious expressions, but no one stepped up to confront us yet. After all, our ulterior motive wasn't really obvious. They can't decide whether we're genuinely asking out of concern or using manipulation to extract information. Not only that, it seems like Totsuka has a high position in their class hierarchy as Katsuragi's right-hand man. They couldn't come forward even if they felt like Totsuka was getting played by the two of us.

"Well... you see-"

"Yahiko? What are you doing? I don't recall giving you



permission to invite guests."

We were this close to getting something concrete. However, a tall student came out from the cave. It was Katsuragi Kouhei.

"K-Katsuragi-san... These two Class B students were asking some questions, and-"

"It's fine, no matter." Katsuragi interrupted him before facing us. "You're Ayanokouji, right? I've met you and Horikita Suzune back on the ship. What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you again, Katsuragi. This is Matsushita, a fellow classmate. The two of us were assigned with checking out the other classes' base camps."

After nodding to Matsushita's greeting wave, Katsuragi instantly tackled the situation.

"So you're curious about ours, too? Certainly, the way we covered up the entrance would raise some questions."

Oh... At least, he's aware that this vinyl tarp is weird.

"Is there anything inside that other people aren't supposed to see?" asked Matsushita.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that. We've prohibited non-Class A students from entering, as well."

"Hmmm... I see. That's understandable." Matsushita nodded understandingly as if she could see where Katsuragi was coming from.

"Oh? Aren't you going to ask further? When Class C's Kanzaki interrogated me earlier, he tried to force his way in by using the rules."

Katsuragi raised an eyebrow, probing the meaning behind Matsushita's response.

"It's certainly not within the rules for a student from a different class to barge in on another class's base camp. We're not given the right to monopolize the area surrounding the spot, after all," she explained. "But I guess you can call it an unspoken rule of sorts. Or at least, that's what it feels like for me. You get what I'm saying, right, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I nodded in response. Matsushita understood the situation, after all.

"I'm glad we're on the same page. As you've explained, we're fundamentally not the owners of any area, but because of the rules, we're compelled to camp around certain main spots to garner points and protect our assigned leader's identity. Class A has this cave, Class B has the river, and Class C has the well. If we look at how everything works, you can say that the areas around the main spots are half-monopolized," Katsuragi replied with a satisfied nod. "That's why I adopted a strategy of *To Each Their Own*; to prevent



conflict."

Impressive. Since Katsuragi already knew about our base camp, he must've sent some scouts yesterday.

"Sigh... So basically, you don't want us to meddle with your business. We can force our way in, but we must also be prepared for the consequences. That's what you're saying, right?" I asked with a shrug.

"Indeed. If you do anything that we deem malicious, our class will strike back. As a fellow member of the upper classes, it's better to avoid trouble."

"You're right, Katsuragi. For Class A and B, the better strategy would be to conserve and increase points. Trying to go on the attack is riskier," I agreed with a nod. "Well, if that's the case, then I guess we should get going. We've inconvenienced you guys for a while now."

Matsushita followed me as we walked away into the forest. But before we could leave...

"Wait," Katsuragi called out as he slowly approached us.

At this point, the mood has completely shifted. The Class A students around him finally felt that our little innocent performance was nothing but a farce. And Katsuragi and I were about to have a battle of passive hostility using words.

"Is there a problem?"

My attitude finally exuded some arrogance.

"This question has been on my mind ever since May. Your own class adviser must've told you about this already, but your class was the first-ever Class D to be ever promoted. How did you do it? It shouldn't be something boring like 'everyone worked hard to be a good and rule-abiding student', right?"

Like Ryuen, Katsuragi must've already been hypothesizing that someone in our class figured out the S-System from the start. He was probably just asking me for confirmation.

"Do you really think we'd share that information when you're being this secretive about your little cave?" I asked provocatively.

"Hm, I see. It was quite shameless of me to simply ask that out. If it's not about our base camp, then I'm willing to exchange information with you."

"Then we can have this conversation some other time. We have places to be, after all," I said as turned around.

"Maybe you can answer this other question of mine, however," Katsuragi spoke out. "Class D has Ryuen while Class C has Ichinose. Class A has me, though a portion of our classmates recognizes Sakayanagi as the class leader. But for Class B, it's always been unclear. Who's leading your class?"



Matsushita looked at me with a slightly anxious expression, but she was also slowly trying to comprehend my sudden shift in gears.

"You can say that it's me, but Horikita and Hirata could also be considered as leaders."

"Interesting. I didn't think you'd be straightforward. It makes me think that you're not treating us like a threat."

"You misunderstand. I don't plan on underestimating my enemies."

Katsuragi replied with a stare.

"Well, you've gotten your answer, so we'll be going on ahead now." I gave him a side glance before leaving.

Katsuragi watched us walk away with a sharp look. From start to finish, he remained unperturbed. His composure is certainly worthy of mention. Someone like that could make decisions effectively-- a trait fit for a leader.

When Matsushita and I entered the forest, we swiftly reached the cornfield.

"So... That just happened..."

"I don't think it's a big deal."

"That's Class A you're challenging, you know?! Well, that's probably what I would've said if you were any other person, but since it's you, then I guess Class A isn't so scary."

Matsushita shrugged as if none of this involves her at all.

"I'm glad you have a lot of faith in me, but I can't fight them on my own, you know?"

I feel like I had this conversation with Kikyou before...



## Vol. 3: Chapter 8.1 - Taking Over The East

2nd Day, 1:30 PM.

When we got back to the camp, our classmates greeted us with a smile.

"Welcome back, Kiyotaka-kun, Matsushita-san. We've prepared lunch for you." Kushida received us warmly with her friends following behind.

"Ah, thank you, Kushida-san, everyone. You're so sweet," replied Matsushita.

Grabbing my share of well-cooked fish and corn, I approached Hirata and asked about the situation.

Since we got the upgraded cookware set, we obtained cooking materials and gas in exchange for a more expensive buy. It was worth it, but Class C's water shower also had gas. Even though their cookware set only consists of utensils, the supply of gas from the water shower made their expenditure much less if they also decide to use them for cooking. As expected of Ichinose's class.

After confirming everything with Hirata, it was time for the next part of my investigations.

"I see... Is Horikita doing alright?"

"It's as you've said, Ayanokouji-kun. Horikita-san was quite sick when their group got back. I'm having her rest inside one of the girls' tents for now. She told me to apologize for her once you come back."

"If her condition isn't too bad, then it's all good. She'll probably recover tomorrow. Have Karuizawa keep an eye on Ibuki for a bit. We'll investigate the place we talked about last night after I reinvoke our right."

"I understand."

With that, Hirata and I stealthily headed out into the woods. None of us were familiar with the forest yet. Apart from the area around our base camp, we'd need a map to navigate the island and use self-made indicators like markings on trees.

I frantically scanned the manual as we walked. Trying to match that vague shape from Ryuen's small drink table isn't the easiest thing to do. There were a lot of available objects that might share the same shape and size.



"This is it. This was the tree that Ibuki-san was leaning against when we found her," said Hirata.

"I see. Good job, Hirata. I'll investigate the small area around this tree. I want you to scout the southwestern part of the forest from here. You can have the map while doing so."

"Is it alright if I ask why?"

"Ryuuen's class will either retire tomorrow, which is the third day or after that, the fourth day. Surely, they won't try to camp out on the beach, especially at night where the tides are high. If my hunch is right, they might've set up their base camp in the direction that I told you. If you mark some trees in that area, we can navigate around it easier when needed."

"I see... If we can move around that area, it'll be harder for them to send out snoopers effectively. Thank you for explaining, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll be back in a bit." Satisfied with my explanation, Hirata went ahead and left.

I turned around and surveyed the ground. Because it was hot, spotting unnatural soil patches was very easy.

"I see... So that's his plan..."

It was a little over two in the afternoon when Hirata and I got back. Under Karuizawa and her friends' watchful eyes, Ibuki couldn't do anything but sit tight. Apparently, Karuizawa managed to take all of her time by interrogating her aggressively. And when she sensed that Ibuki's fuse was about to blow, she stopped playing the bad cop and proceeded to accept her presence with vigilance. That's what she told us, at least.

Right now, Ibuki walked back to her usual place and minded her own business while indifferently observing our campsite.

"Aren't I amazing?" Her expression was proud and cute.

"Thank you for your help, Karuizawa-san." Hirata nodded with a smile.

"Good job, Karuizawa. You can tell me the details of what you talked about when I get back. The search party will be heading out again. It's time to find more spots," I said.

"Finally, huh...? Do you think Class A has found more than one spot already?" she asked nervously.

"Most likely, yes. I wanted to prioritize our base until the third day, but given what Matsushita and I have seen earlier, Class A's control on the western region is quite apparent. We can't let them get ahead too much."

"Leave the rest to us, Ayanokouji-kun. We'll hold the fort for you guys." Hirata reassured me with a cool expression.

"Yeah, I'll be counting on you."



2nd Day, 2:23 PM.

"Alright, let's do this, Kiyotaka!" roared Ken.

"Pleased to work with you, everyone!" cheered Satou.

I wanted both Horikita and Matsushita to rest so I assigned Satou and Ken to act as substitutes for them.

The six of us assembled and would go out under the guise of food procurement. With Hirata and Karuizawa's leadership for the boys and girls, respectively, I can rest assured that everything will turn out alright when I return.

We headed out directly to the east. Everyone gasped in awe when we reached the photogenic view of the beach.

"Amazing! The sand is so nice!"

"We can definitely play some volleyball 'round here!"

"It's quite near, too."

It wouldn't be a bad idea to have everyone swim here on the fourth or fifth day. I'll suggest it to Hirata.

"For now, let's head north from here. Please tell me if you notice any strange or out-of-place landmarks," I said. Chabashira-sensei loosely commented about boulders and plaques as things to look out for. It's safe to say that seeing them would lead us to spots.

We entered the forest for shade before walking north. Of course, it wasn't long until we found what I was looking for. A very nice cave opening that's enveloped by the forest could be seen at the end of the beach.

"Woah, this is a cave, isn't it, Kiyotaka? Now we have our own. Not just Class A." Ken asked with a proud grin. He's really competitive, isn't he?

"At first, I thought it was, but there's actually an exit if we try to walk all the way to the other end," I replied.

"Eh? Wait-- Wait a minute, how did you know about that, Ayanokouji-kun? Have you been here? I thought this is the first time you've explored the east?" asked Satou.

The other ones nodded in wonder.

"Well, you see, some of us surveyed the island when the ship went around it yesterday. Namely, Hirata and Horikita, along with me. The three of us took note of each unique landmark that could be significant for later."

"S-Seriously? The exam wasn't announced by that time, was it?"

"Ayanokouji, are you perhaps talking about the PA before we disembarked?" asked Makida.

"Yeah, that's it. Good job on taking notice, Makida."

"No, no. I was talking about it with Setsuya and the other guys, but we never really thought much about it. It was weird, but we



didn't put our guards up because we thought they were only giving us hints about potential spots for picture taking..." he explained.

"So the three of you already had an idea of what might happen right from the start? As expected!" Onodera praised me and the other two (who weren't here) with a smile.

We entered the tunnel while the entrance was highly illuminated by the blazing sunlight. When we walked a dozen meters in, our sights were finally blessed by a very familiar object.

"A device! This really is a spot!"

"Hell yeah!"

I quickly registered my name on the device so we can earn our first provisional point outside our main spot. Alright, this is a good start.

"Okay, let's head back to base now. This is a very nice find. But of course, since Ibuki is in our camp, please don't tell anyone about this for now."

After they nodded in agreement, we continued walking and saw the exit. The tunnel brought us to the eastern edge of the forest where the ocean was visible. We paced through the trees and arrived at the northern part of the river.

"Makida, Okitani, Onodera, and Satou, I want the four of you to go back to our base camp first. If you follow the river down south, you'll get back without a problem." I instructed them before facing Ken. "Ken, the two of us will go up this hill and check some business. Are you up for it?"

Ken, who was initially confused, widened his grin with a clench of his fists.

"No problem! You've run around the island since morning. If I can't keep up while relaxing back at the fishing dock, then I'd be a wimp."

Makida might've been the better pick since he was much more familiar with the area. After all, he reached the top along with Horikita and some other classmates yesterday. However, since speed and stamina were essential, I decided to have Ken as my tag-along.

"Good. Follow my lead. We'll rev you up with a running exercise."

"Hell yeah, you got it!"

When the other group split up with us, Ken and I bolted through the woods. We immediately felt the change in elevation because of the uneven slant of the ground. I know that it's fine as long as I follow the general direction towards the top, so I focused on dodging obstacles instead of directions. There wasn't any need to waste our time marking trees either.

Of course, Ken managed to keep up with me using his large



energy tank and his strong, lengthy legs.

"Phew~! The hell? You didn't even break a sweat," he commented after observing my condition.

"That's not true. My shirt is pretty much drenched," I replied. "I should take a quick dive on the river after resting..."

The water is going to feel so refreshing. I can't wait.

Ken and I observed the top and saw the spring. When we looked around, we could only make excited noises with how amazing the view was. The only elevation point that's higher than us were the two mountains to our west. This was a very ideal spot to take pictures.

"So, Kiyotaka? Do you have any idea where the possible spot might be?"

"No, actually. Let's just look around, for now. This hilltop is very small. If there's a spot, then it'll be easier to find than the ones scattered around the dense forest."

As expected, it didn't take long until the mechanism revealed itself.

"It's here!" yelled Ken.

The way his voice produced an echo was quite amusing. I wonder if the people from below could hear him.

I approached Ken and saw the device attached to a boulder, much like the one near the river. However, this one was much more inconspicuous. The way it's blended with a bunch of fully bloomed hollyhocks tells me that it was deliberately hidden.

"This is awesome! Another spot!"

After I registered my key card, Ken and I rushed back down, straight towards our base camp. I relayed most of my findings to Hirata.

If Ibuki was really a spy, she must be having the worst time of her life. With our class being coordinated, it'll be hard to make a move and to find out our leader's identity. Even if most of my classmates aren't severely on guard, she's still overwhelmingly outnumbered.

For now, the second day was a fruitful day for our class. Two new spots were discovered and taken over. It's very unlikely for students of other classes to find them unless they have a detailed map. For Class A, it's quite impossible for them to try and explore the eastern area when they have the western region occupied. I thought about all of that while relaxing in the river.



*Author's Notes:*

*This was when Ichinose and Kanzaki met Kiyotaka on the beach during the fourth day. Assuming that Ichinose's class was checking up on Ryuuen's class every day, them retiring on the fourth day should be the canon. If there were some students left around playing in the water, then they needed enough supplies to survive the night. They couldn't come back down on the island once they board the ship, after all. This was why I concluded that Ryuuen's class camped it out until the third day, retiring in the morning of the fourth day. That's also the reason why Kiyotaka saw them stockpiling on food when he visited the first time.*



## Vol. 3: Chapter 8.1.2 - Holding On To You

2nd Day, 9:00 PM.

I was assigned on night watch, along with some classmates. We'll be monitoring the camp until 12:30 AM. After that, we can go ahead and sleep with the rest of the class.

Four of our night watchers hung out with other students around the bonfire. I sat near the boys' tent using a much smaller campfire as a light source. I continued reading the manual and my map.

"Good work today, Kiyotaka-kun." The voice of Kikyou rang through my ears. "Our classmates are really happy right now. Even though Kouenji-kun's retirement tipped us off for a bit, everyone recovered their morale after seeing you work hard as the class's all-rounder."

Since there was only one tree branch to sit on, Kikyou decided to sit beside me. Because of the branch's modest size, her shoulders consistently touched mine.

"Good work today, Kikyou. The fruits that you and your friends were providing us really helped a lot in saving up points."

"It's nothing much. All of us are happy to help. And besides this entire exam is a really refreshing experience, even if it wasn't the summer vacation that we initially expected."

"That's true."

Kikyou subtly leaned her weight against me.

"You know, Kiyotaka-kun. When Mashima-sensei announced the exam, I imagine a scenario where you weren't there to lead us."

That's an interesting thought.

"Hm? What happened in that scenario?"

"Hirata-kun would still probably try his best to lead the class, but he doesn't have the same amount of decisiveness that you have. Horikita-san won't be able to relay her thoughts properly because you're not there as her bridge to communicate with the class..." she sighed. "No matter how much I try to look at it in a positive light, the only outcome I can see is a severe lack in coordination."

Kikyou was probably right. Even I can recognize the unshakeable position that I've established for myself.

"Have you ever imagined a situation where I didn't buy the explanation for the S-System?" I asked.

This was one of the many topics that Matsushita and I have



talked about before.

"Oh, that's interesting." Kikyou pondered excitedly.

Her expression turned darker and darker until it became grim.

"It'll be seriously bad, I think." She replied with a slightly quivering voice. "You and I have been close with our classmates. If you were going to be extremely honest, how many points do you think will we have left after the first month, given their attitudes?"

"0 points," I answered instantly.

"So fast! Have you thought about this before?"

"I've talked about that topic a couple of times with Matsushita and Nishimura. At first, we estimated the remaining points to be somewhere around 50 or 100 points, but after diving into the details of our classmates' early behaviors, 0 points seemed like the most probable result."

Ike and Yamauchi's misbehavior and Sudou's violence were just the tip of the iceberg. If it weren't for the S-System, our classmates would most certainly slack off and their fundamentals in academics wouldn't be as good as now. Consequently, they wouldn't even bother observing proper conduct during class. If that's how everything went for the first month... I can only imagine the deductions.

"That's a scarily convincing theory... I don't really know what to say next, but uh, thank you, I guess, Kiyotaka-kun."

It's funny how those two said the same thing.

"Well, there's no need to think too much about it. We're pretty close to Class A. If we keep doing our best, we'll have a lot of winning chances."

"Yep! Everyone's doing their part, no matter how small."

I kept the manual and map inside my bag. Kikyou and I continued staring at the campfire with our classmates' laughter as background noise-- our backs facing them.

"We haven't hung out much, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Yeah..."

"And you're getting really close with Matsushita-san and Ryuukochan."

"I don't know about that..."

"Ichinose-san, too."

Wait, what's with this topic? Well, no matter. I'll just go with the flow.

"Are you jealous?" I asked jokingly.

"Yes... I am."

Surprised, I turned my head to look at Kikyou.

"As a friend, of course. Don't get your hopes up, idiot~."

"I wasn't. There wasn't any hope, to begin with."



Kikyou chuckled cutely, but her chuckle felt oddly self-deprecating.

"You're right... It's quite... unfortunate."

Kikyou's feelings for me have most likely shifted in *that* direction, and she's not even trying to hide it anymore. If she was willing, I'd probably have no reason to reject her. But both of us know that it can't happen unless she lets go of her undying obsession-- her way of life.

While walking on this tightrope, Kikyou is trying to keep me tied in, fearing that I might get taken by someone else. That should be the reason why she stopped being subtle about everything. If I was conscious of her, then it'd be hard for me to develop feelings for another girl.

And right now, Kikyou was under the impression that I value her highly. While I do value her to some degree, she's probably thinking that I'll put her above anyone else apart from myself. I can use that mindset to keep her on my side. Her social connections are too strong. The current Kikyou is formidable enough to be considered dangerous.

Huh? It's been a minute or two since silence broke out in the camp. Why did our classmates' noise stop so suddenly?

Thinking about the same thing, Kikyou and I turned around in unison.

"Uh, what are you guys looking at?" I asked.

"Ehehe... Well, you and Kushida-san just looked so cute together. We can't help but watch!" chuckled Mori.

"Kuuu-- Lucky you, Ayanokouji!" Onizuka gave me a stiff thumbs-up.

"G-Guys, calm down. Kiyotaka-kun and I were just sitting together." Kikyou waved her hands in denial.

"Oh, it's cold, after all. Sidling up towards each other is a must, too. It's alright, Kikyou-chan. I understand," teased Onodera.

"Kayano-chan!" cried Kikyou.

In the end, Kikyou and I decided to join the rest of them. Everyone gossiped, joked, told stories, and asked weird questions. As the silent guy, I was often the one who gets interrogated. Hanging out with friends around a campfire wasn't something I've experienced before. It was really fun, to say the least. We continued to hang out until everyone got tired and decided to hit the sack.

After taking care of everything, I went ahead and entered one of the boys' tents.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 8.1.3 - Confession

3rd Day, 6:30 AM.

Almost everyone from Class B has woken up. I was currently doing some chores; cleaning the remains of our fire pit and such. Voices of girls could be heard from a considerable distance behind me. I can barely make out what they were saying.

"You can do it, Kokoro-chan!"

"We're here for you!"

"We'll be cheering you on!"

Kikyou, Ishikura, Nishimura, and the other girls, huh?

Oh-- Is this what I think it will be...?

I was too scared to even look. A few seconds passed before I started hearing light footsteps.

"U-Uhm, Ayanokouji-kun-" Unsurprisingly, it was Inogashira's voice.

Of course, I turned around to face her.

"Good morning, Inogashira. Can I help you?" I tried to be as polite as I can, emulating what Hirata might say.

"Good morning... Um, is it alright if I take your time for a little bit...? There's... something that I've been meaning to tell you for a long time now..."

I see...

"Sure. I'm done with my work here, anyway."

"I-Is it alright if we talk in private? It's pretty embarrassing, so I want to get away from the camp before I tell you..." Inogashira bowed her head apologetically.

"It's all good, as long as we don't walk too far and make the others worry."

"Okay," she nodded.

I led her towards a part of the forest where it was far enough to avoid eavesdropping but close enough to go back easily.

"Is this place alright with you?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you very much."

"Well then, I'm all ears."

Inogashira's face went red as soon as I passed the mic. The pressure finally caught up to her.

"Um, uhh... You see, Ayanokouji-kun..." she muttered, looking downwards.



Inogashira was really struggling with her words, but she psych'd herself up and mustered enough courage to face me straight.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun, I..." Inogashira closed her eyes before continuing. "I like you. Please go out with me."

At least, I wasn't being overly conscious this time. I was ready to bury myself alive.

Her words echoed across these parts of the woods and Inogashira slowly started realizing what she had just said.

"Thank you, Inogashira," I replied.

"Uh- Uhm, that was..."

Inogashira was extremely gentle regardless of the situation. She wasn't like Airi who panics whenever she's high-strung. Even in this kind of situation, Inogashira's expression was timid, but it was almost as if she wasn't feeling tense. If Airi was in the same situation, her lips would probably tremble nonstop.

"Sorry if I'm not giving any sort of reaction. No one has ever confessed to me before so I don't really know what to feel or say."

"No... It's okay, Ayanokouji-kun..."

This will be hard, but I need to respond.

"I'm really grateful for your feelings, Inogashira, but... I don't think I can be that person for you."

Anyone could instantly know what a person is feeling just by looking at their facial expressions. However, it's an entirely different thing whether you can sympathize with what they feel. Right now, all I know is that Inogashira is hurt... by my words.

"I... I see..."

"I'm sorry..." That was probably the only thing I can say at this point.

Inogashira shook her head slowly, trying to hold back the tears that have been forming around her misty eyes.

"No, please don't be, Ayanokouji-kun... To be honest... I... I kind of expected this already..."

"I think you're a wonderful person, Inogashira. Those are my honest thoughts. But at this point in time, I'm just don't think I'm ready for a relationship yet. It doesn't really matter who confesses."

The last part was a lie, but Inogashira is too innocent to be involved with me from an intimate distance. If I decide to go out with her, she'll be nothing but a target.

Inogashira sheepishly wiped her tears and smiled.

"You don't have to make me feel better, Ayanokouji-kun. I understand that it's just a one-sided crush."

"I'm sorry."

"Please stop apologizing. I'm the one who's starting to feel bad," Inogashira chuckled melancholically.



"I see..." I wanted to continue talking, but she spoke out in a hurry.

"Uhm, Ayanokouji-kun, I'll be going back to the base camp. I know my way back, so I'll be fine... See you later!"

Before I could respond, Inogashira turned around and ran back towards the campsite's direction. As I watched her back, I could only sigh. If Matsushita's words are true, then she shouldn't be the only girl who has romantic feelings for me. Inogashira Kokoro; the girl that always came off as someone who's not strong-willed, was actually the one who had the courage to confess first.

I don't think I should go back just yet... And besides...

"Why did you follow us here, Haruka?"

"Eh-?! I got busted?!"

A lone girl walked away from a tree that covered her body.

"W-When did you find out, Kiyopon...?" Haruka guiltily scratched her head as she approached me.

"Right from the beginning."

"Geh- A-As expected from you, I guess..."

"So? You wanna explain yourself?"

"Well, I certainly did a bad thing, but I was just curious! I saw you walk off with Inogashira-san so I was interested in what you guys would talk about... I didn't expect it to be a confession!"

"Regardless of the topic, isn't it still bad for you to eavesdrop?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Ugh... I'm sorry..." Haruka apologized while drooping her head.

I sat beneath the tree beside me since the morning air was making me feel relaxed.

I like this feeling. In an environment like this, the invitations of such trees always draw me in. Haruka decided to sit beside me in a similar fashion.

"Um, if you don't mind me asking, why did you reject Inogashira-san?" Haruka rested her cheek on top of her knees while facing me.

"Didn't you already hear what I told her?" I answered with a question.

"Well, yeah. But you were kinda lying, right? Whenever you talk about getting a girlfriend with Miyacchi and Kencchin, you always said that you wanted one."

"I certainly did, and that has some truth in it. But after experiencing a real confession... I figured that, as you've heard, I may not be suited to be in a relationship just yet," I shrugged. "Getting everyone to Class A is my main priority right now."

"Ohh, I thought you replied like you did so that you wouldn't hurt her too much... As expected of you, I guess."

"It's pretty stressful, you know? If Inogashira and I were to go out,



I don't think I'd have enough time for her."

"So you'll be up for it once we get into Class A? Wouldn't the stress increase because everyone will be after us?"

"Well, that's just one factor. If I find a girl that I like, then I probably won't care if it gets in the way of my role as the leader."

"A girl that Kiyopon likes, huh...? There isn't anyone in your mind right now?"

"Hmm... not really." I shook my head in response.

"It's making the rounds, though-- about you and Kushida-san getting really close last night."

Woah, so fast. Did they talk about it as soon as they woke up? Or did more of my classmates see us from their tents...? Regardless, I am, once again, everyone's gossip material. At this point, I've become used to it.

"We were just sitting together, but I guess it makes sense for our classmates to talk about it."

"Do you really not like Kushida-san?" she asked.

"Well, if I were to choose between like or dislike, then I definitely like her."

"How about me and Airi?" Haruka sat up enthusiastically.

"You guys are my friends. Of course, I like you."

"Hmm~, I see. So Kiyopon likes us, huh? I'll be sure to tell Airi later!"

"Don't say things that people will misunderstand, you idiot."

"I won't, I won't, I promise~!" Haruka laughed as she replied.

Both of us heaved a sigh, looking at the green leaves ruffling through the morning breeze.

"You know, Kiyopon. The group has been trying to find some time to hang out with you. Kencchin was hyped about it, but Miyacchi told us to give you some space. After all, you're busy leading us in this exam. We get his point, and it's really not a requirement for you to be present in the group. That's the way we are, right? A band of loners..." Haruka looked up at the sky while sighing. "But as expected, it feels pretty incomplete when you're not there."

"I see. I'm glad that you guys feel that way, but it's also true that I've got a lot on my plate. We've found some spots yesterday. As the *assigned leader*, I have to run around the entire island just to occupy them."

"Oh, that's cool! But... that's what Miyacchi's worried about. We don't want to get in your way."

"I'll have time to hang out with you guys after the exam."

Haruka opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but stopped and sighed before standing up.



"Let's get back, Kiyopon. We'll have breakfast before the roll call, remember?" Haruka shrugged. "It's okay if you act as if nothing happened. It's not like you're the one who confessed, anyway."

So that's how it works? I'll trust an actual girl's opinion this time.

As we walked back to the campsite, I realized that another day has passed in this special test. Each class's plans are slowly getting realized. It's only a matter of time before a clash between any of us happens.

And also, I hope *she* was happy with what she heard.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 9.1 - The Calm Before the Storm

After the roll call, everyone started doing their own thing. I approached Hirata because I wanted to suggest an activity for the whole class.

"That's a great idea, Ayanokouji-kun. It might take away some stress for everyone," he said.

Every single student of Class B, apart from Kouenji, gathered around Hirata. Ibuki was watching, as well.

"Everyone, Ayanokouji-kun suggested something for the class to do later. After lunch, we would have a swimming party."

Our classmates gasped in surprise. A lot of the guys were visibly excited. We came to this island under the impression that we were going to have a luxurious summer vacation, so all of us brought our bathing suits.

"Hirata-kun, wouldn't it be cramped, though? There are too many people in the class," asked Karuizawa.

Forty people (including Ibuki) wouldn't be able to enjoy the river, especially if they wanted to go in at the same time. And besides, the shallow parts of the river aren't big enough to occupy all of us.

"Yes, you're right, Karuizawa-san. That's why we'll divide the class into two. Fifteen students will be here to play in the river and the remaining twenty-four will be swimming at the eastern beach," he replied.

"Hirata, Ayanokouji, you're not suggesting that we'll be spending points for this, right?" asked Yukimura.

His concern was absolutely valid. If that were to be the case, then we're no better than Class D.

"Don't worry, Yukimura-kun. We won't spend any points on this. That's also why we wanted everything to be ready by lunch. Since our base camp is looking pretty stable now, I want everyone to gather in groups so most of us can go search for more food. Ike-kun and the others will focus on fishing. Although we won't be able to buy anything to make things more fun, I think it'll be alright as long as we get the chance to play in the water. We'll have a lot of food to eat, as well. I wonder if everyone is okay with this?" With that explanation, everyone who was stressed out for the past couple of



days should be down. A little bit of relaxation isn't too bad after all the hard work we put into making our base camp.

"I'm in!"

"Yeah, swimming time!"

"Let's do it~!"

Our classmates cheered and started forming groups. Hirata will be the one who'll lead the class to the beach with Makida and Okitani since they know the way. Meanwhile, I will be in charge of the group that'll swim in the river while guarding the campsite.

"Ibuki-san, do you want to come with us to the beach?" asked Hirata.

"I'll stay here," Ibuki answered curtly.

"I understand," he nods. "Then, we'd have fourteen students who will stay here, including Ibuki-san."

I instructed Kikyuu to invite Ibuki in advance, mostly to keep an eye on her. But of course, any new information would help along with the things that Karuizawa has told me. Their group was assigned to search around the central parts of the island-- far away from my group.

"Ibuki-san, do you want to help us find food?"

"Huh, me?" Ibuki asked in surprise. "Sure, I guess. I owe you guys a lot by now, so I'll help."

"Great! Pleased to have you in our group!" Kikyuu replied with a wide smile.

After they left, I immediately registered my name back on the device by the river. When the search party came together, I told everyone that I'll handle the spots alone so they could spend all of their time searching for food.

"Are you sure, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Matsushita.

"Yeah. I'll be back at the base camp with you guys, so wait for me at the place I told you about."

Even Horikita agreed without a word. She knew that forcing herself to keep up with me will tire out her recovering body.

Without wasting any time, I ran towards the southeast. It's a completely new area to me, so I decided to explore it first. Unlike yesterday, I can finally run around without worrying about anyone else.

It didn't take too long before I reached the marked location on the map.

"It's not the most accurate pin, but it'll do," I muttered as I started walking around the huge live oak tree.

This place was a pretty obvious spot, but it's not an ideal place for a base camp. The forest area around it was filled with trees, but none of them were fruit-bearing. Not only that, you'd have to cross



a steep rocky terrain if you want to reach the ocean without taking a long way around or opting for the eastern beach.

"There it is..."

I finally found a small wooden plaque that wasn't too far away from the tree itself. After registering my key card, I made haste towards the edge of the island.

Following the way up north, I ended up on the beach and sprinted full-speed. Upon reaching the rock tunnel, I reinvoked our right of exclusive possession on the device.

After trailing the same path we took yesterday, I coincidentally saw Karuizawa and some of her friends along with Hirata and a couple of boys. As expected, they were trying to find food like the others. I slipped past them by going around the north and arrived before the hill's foot, just beside the river.

Upon reaching the top, I rested my body as the strong rays of sunlight clashed with the powerful gust of wind. I took my shirt off and stayed there for a couple of minutes.

After settling everything, I rushed back down and ran towards our rendezvous location. I briefly looked at the clock and noticed that three and a half hours have passed.

3rd Day, 12:05 PM.

"Ah, he's here!" Onodera was the first one to notice my arrival.

"Oh, welcome back, Ayanokouji!" said Okitani.

"Man, you look beat..." Makida commented after seeing my drenched shirt and ragged breath.

"Well, I *am* beat..." I replied.

"Are you alright, Ayanokouji-kun? How many places did you go through to be this worked up?" Horikita asked with a slightly concerned expression.

I observed the decent harvest in their hands while pondering about my answer.

"Hmm... first up was the spot by the river, of course. After we split up, I occupied a new spot near the big live oak tree on the southeast. Then, I ran to the rock tunnel by the eastern beach for the other spot. Lastly, I went up the hill where Horikita and the others found the spring and re-occupied the spot that Ken and I found yesterday," I narrated. "So that's four spots in total."

The five of them listened with dumbfounded faces.

"You... did all that...?" asked Onodera.

"I think I saw the big live oak that you were talking about back on the ship... Wasn't that near the edge of the island...?" asked Okitani.

"Are you serious...?" added Makida.



"We thought that you just went to the rock tunnel and ran back..." Matsushita smiled bitterly.

Well, their shock was justified. But to be honest, the island was pretty small. I took this long due to the natural obstacles. As someone who isn't familiar with the outdoors, they really slowed me down.

After regaining their composure, Horikita gave me some news.

"Hirata-kun and the others took two of the boys' tents. Most of them went back early to prepare their place at the beach."

"I see, that's good. It's already past 12 o'clock. We should head back and eat lunch, too."

We had enough food to last until the swimming party is over. And even if we didn't, we had enough reserve budget to order a meal set, all thanks to the corn.

After we got back, Chabashira-sensei supervised us with her usual expression. Even if most of my classmates were playing around at the beach right now, she was still here. It indicates the significance of our base camp.

Seven boys were left to enjoy the river. The same number can be observed for the girls in our class-- eight if we include Ibuki, who's from a different class.

I didn't change my clothes yet, but of course, I plan to join my classmates soon. It's not a matter of wanting it. I *need* to join them.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 9.2 - Small Blunder

Akito, Ken, Professor, Ijuuin, Okitani, and Makida were the guys left at the base camp to swim on the river, including me. Meanwhile, the girls were: Airi, Haruka, Horikita, Kikyou, Ishikura, Onodera, and Nishimura. Matsushita was here with us not too long ago, but she was fetched by Satou and Shinohara.

On a slightly farther riverbank, Ibuki observed the running water with a calm expression.

"Kokoro-chan and Mii-chan will be staying at the beach today. I think it'll be fine as long they have each other. Nene-chan and Ichihashi-san will be there with them as well."

"I see..."

"It's alright, Ayanokouji-kun. You didn't have to feel guilty or anything. Kokoro-chan just needs some time," said Nishimura.

It wasn't a surprise that Kikyou's friend group know about what happened between me and Inogashira. After all, they should've been the ones who comforted her when she got back.

I faced Kikyou after Nishimura left.

"So she was the girl you were talking about from back then, huh?"

"Yeah..."

It seemed like Kikyou wanted to tell me more, but something was stopping her.

"Kikyou... I only heard about this from someone so correct me if I'm wrong, but is it true that a lot of the girls in our class like me?"

Kikyou was shocked by my words. She turned her head around, looking for anyone who might've heard me.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun, who told you?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"That's understandable, and I can already guess who it is, anyway," she shrugged. "Well, since you're already aware, then I guess it's fine if I tell you more."

"Please do... I don't really know what to believe anymore..." I sighed.

"Hihi~. I'm the only one you can truly believe, after all~."

"Yes, yes, you're the only one. Now tell me." I dismissed her teasing with a deadpan response.

"Geez, you don't have to be sarcastic about saying it!" Kikyou pouted cutely.



I patted her head on reflex but retreated my hand after a few seconds. It would be bad if anyone comes by. Looking a bit disappointed, Kikyoun began to speak.

"Well, first of all, it's true that a lot of the girls in our class like you." Kikyoun stopped herself before continuing. "But I guess it's more accurate to say that all of the girls in our class have a crush on you at the very least..."

"Are you serious...? I understand that Hirata's already taken, but..."

Objectively speaking, it should make sense that some of them would develop a romantic attraction towards me. Kikyoun, Matsushita, Satou, Mori, Airi, and Haruka were the most plausible candidates given how close I was with them...

"Oh, you don't have to think too much about it. It's not like you're the only guy that they're crushing on. Girls can have more than one crush at the same time, you know? That's what makes us girls~!"

"O-Oh... Is that how it works...?"

"Yep~! But of course, once we find a person that we truly like, then those other crushes would naturally disappear... unless you're a two-timer or something..." Kikyoun rolled her eyes.

She's told me a lot of stories about shitty people in the past. One of them was a guy who adamantly hit on her despite having a girlfriend. Of course, she still had to keep her face up no matter how much she wanted to chew him out. She had it hard back then, huh?

"I see... I'll keep that in mind."

"Kikyoun-chan, let's change!" called Nishimura.

"I'll be there!" Kikyoun replied before facing me. "Then, I'll be going now, Kiyotaka-kun. Look forward to my swimsuit later, okay?"

"Oh... Okay..."

"Your poker face doesn't hide your excitement, you know~?" she teased before turning around.

Well, I wasn't really excited... Or maybe I was. Just a little.

3rd Day, 1:10 PM.

"Woo-hoo!" yelled Makida.

*\*Splash\**

"Heck yeah!" followed Okitani.

*\*Splash\**

"Pipe it down, boys... The water's getting all over the place." Ishikura scolded with a sigh.

"Haha, isn't it fine, Kayoko-chan? Let them have their fun~!" said Onodera.



"Ey! Take that, Kayoko-chan~!" Kikyou splashed water on Ishikura's face.

"Kyah! That was uncalled for, Kikyou-chan! Take this~!"

Professor and Ijuuin were also in their swimwear. I don't know what they were talking about, but it seems like they're busy conversing about something.

Meanwhile...

"Don't be chickens, you two. Look at us go!" Ken told Airi and Haruka before diving in.

"I thought you guys went swimsuit shopping before? Aren't you gonna swim?" asked Akito.

"B-But..."

"Well, if Airi doesn't go in, then I won't!" Haruka grinned.

"It's up to you guys. The water is really nice." Akito swam after Ken. The two of them proceeded to hang out with Okitani and Makida.

"You're already wearing your swimsuit under your clothes, right, Airi? You don't want to swim?" asked Haruka.

"I thought I could do it, but it's embarrassing, after all." Airi hectically shook her head.

"Alright, I'll stay with you for a while. I'm not fond of showing my skin, anyway," she replied.

Apart from the two of them, every other girl from our class wore their swimsuits while dipping their body in the water. Kikyou teased me a lot, but I managed to survive. At least, that's what it looked like to me.

I walked towards them and crossed paths with Horikita.

"Oh, are you not going to swim?"

"I'm fine... It's better to be sure, given my condition. Swimming in this river water might bring back my cold," she replied.

"I see... Well, it's good that you're being careful now."

"Yes... About the other day... if I hadn't forced myself to help, then I would've been fully recovered by now..." Horikita faced me with an expression that I very rarely see from her. "I'm sorry..."

"It's alright. Just don't be reckless next time. You can go rest inside a tent for now. I'll take care of everything here."

Horikita left after nodding.

I stood up and started walking towards the campsite. I saw Ibuki leaning against a tree while watching our classmates play around in the water.

"You can always join in, you know?" I said.

"Are you kidding? I don't belong here, in the first place," she scoffed at herself. "I'll just continue taking a bath with your shower. I'm already troubling you guys enough."



"Kikyou and her friends are very welcoming. They never treated you like an outsider, right? And besides, you don't really need to hang out with them. You can just swim in the river if you want."

Ibuki stared at me for a while before asking.

"That Kushida girl-- is she your girlfriend?"

"Ah, no. She's just my friend, but a lot of people refer to us as best friends which isn't really inaccurate since she's probably the closest girl to me."

"I see..." Ibuki looked in Kikyou's direction once more.

"Well, if you need something, just tell any of us. I'll be changing over there." I waved my hand slightly before turning around.

By the riverbank, I approached Haruka and Airi, who were watching everyone else swim. At this moment, I was also wearing my own swimwear.

"You're still not going to swim?"

"Oh, Kiyopon~! Hey there!"

"Hello, Kiyotaka-kun. Onodera-san was looking for you earlier..." said Airi.

"Really? What did she need me for?"

"A swimming race," she replied.

"I see... Of course, it's a swimming race." I shrugged with a sigh.

"The water looks tempting though... Fufun~, what if I just push Airi in the water...?"

"H-Haruka-chan, that's not-"

"Well, if you're that worried about showing your skin, then just wear a colored shirt over your swimsuit."

Since we were mostly wearing our white jerseys, getting wet would just make them translucent. They must've been worried about that.

"Oh! But... I don't have dark-colored ones... Ah, Haruka-chan, can I borrow some from you? I'll let you borrow mine in return if you have a spare."

"Oh, you're finally up for it? Sure then. I have an extra indigo shirt."

"Thanks for the idea, Kiyotaka-kun. We'll go ahead and change." Airi nodded with a determined look.

The two of them walked back towards the campsite to change.

Slowly but surely, everyone's trying to improve themselves.

*I wonder if I can change as well...?*

Wearing my own swimming trunks, I swam towards the guys.

"Kiyotaka!" waved Akito.

"Oi, Kiyotaka! Let's race!" As expected, Ken instantly challenged me.

"Ah-! Ayanokouji-kun is here! Let me join the race, too!" said



Onodera.

I hung out with everyone and played around for hours. All things aside, I had fun. I sat by the edge of the river and grabbed a big stone lying around the river bank.

"Something around this size should be safe and decent enough, I guess."

After observing it, I simply dropped the stone in the water.

"Hmm... This should be a good place to h-" Using my finger as a guide, I traced an area arou-

"Ayanokouji-kun." Horikita's sudden arrival disrupted my train of thought. "Can I ask you a question?"

Horikita looked like she'd just woken up.

"Oh, Horikita? What is it?"

"Do you have your key card with you?"

"I don't have it on me, but I kept it tucked inside my bag."

Horikita's eyes narrowed in surprise.

"Wait, isn't it dangerous? After all..."

"You don't trust her?"

"Of course, I don't. You're not saying that you trust her, right?"

"I'm not, don't worry." The two of us looked around and saw Ibuki sitting by a tree. "Well, I guess I let my guard down this time."

"For now, let's check your bag. I'll hold on to the key card while you can't."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you."

When I arrived, I grabbed the clothes that dominated the space inside my bag. At the bottom was the special key card holding my name as Class B's leader.

"It's still here... Thank goodness." Horikita sighed in relief. "Please don't neglect this again, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah... Sorry about this, Horikita."

It seems like I made a small blunder. Frolicking for hours without checking my bag a single time was such an irresponsible act by me. That's probably what Horikita and Ibuki thought.

When the time got past 4:30 PM, I decided to wash up and change back to my jersey.

"I'll go check on Hirata and the others. Guard the base camp and please tell everyone that I'll be gone for a while."

"Understood. Please be careful," Horikita replied as she returned the key card to me.

I also bid farewell to Kikyou and some of her friends. After she occupied Ibuki's attention, I swiftly changed my name on the mechanism by the fishing area.

After a relaxing walk, I finally reached the beach area.



"Hey, Ike, another one!"

"Onizuka, stop pushing!"

On one corner, Ike and the others were catching some fish while playing around in the ocean. Hirata was also keeping most of our classmates company and a lot of the girls were still hanging out by the shore. I approached the tent stationed under the shade. A lone girl was sitting there.

"Karuizawa?"

I immediately noticed that she wearing her sweater over her swimsuit.

"Ayanokouji-kun? What are you doing here?" she asked in slight surprise.

"Well, I just wanted to check how everyone was doing. Why are you here all by yourself?" I asked in return.

"Oh... I didn't feel like swimming." Karuizawa smiled bitterly.

"I see."

Karuizawa always had a reputation of rarely participating during swimming class. She must not like swimming if that were to be the case. And when she does, she opts to wear the school swimsuit even if Higashiyama-sensei permits personal ones.

"Don't you feel hot at all? "

"Not really," she replied. "Oh, it seems like Hirata-kun noticed us. He's coming this way."

The other class leader, Hirata Yousuke, walked in our direction with his usual smile.

"Yo, Ayanokouji-kun. Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Yeah, everyone had their fill on the fun. It seems like the people here are enjoying their time too."

"I'm glad that nothing bad happened today, as well."

Normally, I would've been more intricate with managing every student's role. However, if I were to break this exam apart, it would have a ratio of 80:20 with 80 being defense and 20 being offense. The most offense-oriented class, which is Ryuen's Class D, is out of the count for the most part thus far. Both Class A and C are very very defensive with their approach. If Class B goes against the grain, it would be extremely hard to crack their shells. The ratio is slowly shifting into an all-out 99:1 defensive endurance contest.

The mechanics of this exam is really fitting to be our first. It doesn't focus heavily on the confrontational side of the competition. Instead, it focuses on every class's unity and teamwork. This special test will start to mold every class into what it will be for the rest of our high school years. That's why we can pretty much relax with the details and focus on surviving until the last day. As the leader, I would also do my part and take as many spots as I can.



After leaving some instructions for Hirata, I tread along the dense forest and occupied each spot in the same order as earlier. I got back to the base camp at around 6:30 in the evening with the hilltop spot still unoccupied. At 7:20 PM, our right of exclusive possession will be lost, so I will go back there and take it.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 9.3 - Tranquil Night

"Yo, Ayanokouji!" Ike greeted me with a grin. "Everyone's waiting for you. The girls were looking quite worried, you know? You lucky bastard."

"Wanna switch places with me? You guys might want to explore the island yourselves."

"Ohhh! I'm alright with just fishing and teaching everyone some stuff, but I'm down for tomorrow if everything goes well." Ike lightly slapped my arm before heading back. "C'mon, the boys just got finished making the bonfire, and we've got leftover food from earlier."

Thanks to their work, I managed to find my way to the campsite with ease.

Most of my classmates greeted me upon return. I brought the fruits I got on the way back and had the food experts store them somewhere.

All of us ate supper like normal. The moment I finished, Hirata secretly lent me one of the flashlights so I can use them later. He'll explain everything to Kikyuu, Horikita, and Karuizawa, but for now, I need to leave as fast as I can. After all, the roll call will be held at exactly 8:00 PM. If I leave now, around 6:45, I think I'll have enough time given my familiarity with the place. The darkness will slow me down, but the flashlight and moonlight should be enough to guide me properly.

At around 7:28 PM, I finally reached the top. I barely managed to go back in time many minutes later, at 7:56 PM. Of course, the bonfire acted like my beacon.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun, you're finally back." Hirata greeted me with a pretty loud voice, enough for most of my classmates to hear.

With his help, everyone was under the impression that I went out to the forest to get some wood for my own little campfire, just like last night.

"Yeah... I got lost, but I made it back, somehow."

After Chabashira-sensei's roll call, everyone got ready to just chill out and sleep. As usual, I looked over the map and manual, checking them with a quick scan. While hearing the lively conversations of my classmates, Horikita approached me with her light footsteps.



"Horikita...? Is everything alright?"

This time, I was ready. I prepared a seat across mine if ever someone wanted to talk with me. Horikita sat on the sturdy branch and stared at me. I kept the map and manual back inside my bag.

"Will we continue everything like this?" she asked.

"Pretty much. It would've been nice if we can send out people along with the search party to scout out the other classes' base camps, but it'll be pointless. Class D is a lost cost. I don't know if they've retired already, but they won't get past the fourth day for sure. We're in a cooperative relationship with Class C, so betraying them would hurt us in the long run. And lastly, Class A is pretty much a fortress. As an overall better class, antagonizing them directly would put our current position at risk," I explained.

Katsuragi already suggested a non-conflict strategy for all classes. This can only mean that he's confident about getting more spots than us... Well, the western region certainly has some noticeable spots, but is that really it...? Being secretive about their cave was strange, to begin with. They should have a very good reason for it, and that reason is vital for their success.

"I see... I've been thinking about the same things. In the end, I think the only strategy left is to get points from spots as much as we can. The whole class is stable thanks to your instructions, as well as Karuizawa-san and Hirata-kun's leadership..."

Midnight attacks can be done as long as I'm alone, but the physical risk is too high. The most plausible plan to penetrate Class A's defense is from the inside... I don't know how divided their class is, but colluding with a traitor is a decent plan. It's unfortunate that I don't have connections with any Class A student, though.

We still have three full days... I guess I'll start with gathering information.

"Yeah, let's just wait it out. As long as Class B comes out fine after this, we can consider it a win. I'm sure we'll get more chances to overtake Class A in the future."

Horikita nodded calmly before addressing me for another topic.

"Ayanokouji-kun... I would like to apologize about before."

"Apologize? About what?"

"I know you don't like talking about your past. That's why my behavior from back then must've bothered you a lot." With her somber tone, Horikita talked to me while staring at the small campfire.

"It's alright, to be honest. I understand why you acted like that. It's natural to not trust someone when you barely know what they want," I shrugged. "It's easy to trust you since I already know what you want, though."



"And that is?"

"Reaching Class A and getting your brother's acknowledgment, right?"

"That-... Yes, I can't deny that..."

"And by now, I guess everyone in our class knows what I want."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but as you've mentioned before, you would like to reach Class A then live a peaceful high school."

"Exactly. But unlike most students, I see Class A as a fleeting goal. Once we get to Class A, I'll stop leading the class. That responsibility will be yours and Hirata's. I want to focus on enjoying my high school life peacefully-- full-time."

Like a retiree.

"I see... How will you tell the class?"

"I'll just make some sort of sob story about it-- like how it's too stressful for me to continue being the leader."

At first, I thought about just telling them straight out. *"I'm done being the leader."*, *"I'll be stepping down permanently this time."*... It's not like I absolutely don't want their impressions of me to go down. I'm more concerned about their curiosity, more than anything. I can probably consider everyone in Class B as my friends. They've reached out to me with their problems a lot of times in the past. Most of them would certainly try to ask me why I went through with such a decision.

"But it'll be hard to convince the class. Every one of them knows how mentally and physically formidable you are."

"Yeah, that's why I'll need your help along with Kikyou. As my closest friends, they won't question your words so easily. I'll drop hints for my other friends, too. They'll vouch for you when the time comes."

It's better to have an excuse ready. I wanted the two of them to deliver it so everyone will be satisfied. If anyone ever asks me to elaborate, I can just repeat what Horikita and Kikyou would say.

"Alright, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll help you."

"Don't worry, Horikita. I'll still fulfill my role as a member of the class. Although I don't think I can get extremely high scores in our written exams like before, I won't hold you guys back on academics by slacking off." My written tests always range from 90 to 100 points, but after stepping down, I might bring them down a little bit more. "That goes for athletics, as well. And lastly, it'll be you and Hirata who'll think up of everything for the future special exams."

And I guess that's it for my retirement plan.

"Yes, you can leave it to us."

Fortunately, our conversation was fluid. Horikita understood where I was coming from.



"Thank you, Horikita... for respecting my wishes and all that."

"No, I'm the one who should thank you. If you're suspicious about me being too nice, then please stop because I'm just repaying a favor. We wouldn't be this close to Class A if it weren't you, after all. If you think it's weird, then you're just being rude."

"My bad." I guess she read my mind. "It would've been nice if you can smile like before."

My vague wording shook Horikita.

"Like before...?"

"When we were looking over the old test questions. That's the first time ever seen you smile for real."

Horikita tends to smirk whenever she wins an argument against me. Those moments were the closest I've seen her crack a smile. We've been wild with our audacious grins towards each other, huh?

"Oh... That's what you mean." Horikita's cool expression didn't fade, but I noticed a hint of melancholy from it.

I slowly stood up and faced the boys' tents.

"Don't linger around for too long, Horikita. No one will complain even if you sleep early."

Horikita was assigned on night watch this time. But as her sickness was known to everyone, none of our classmates should have a problem with her going off-duty before midnight.

I lied down and closed my eyes as another day passed for this week-long test.

*Author's Notes:*



## Vol. 3: Chapter 10.1 - On the Other Side

"That'll be the plan. You're fine with that, right?"

"But aren't you going to push yourself, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Then... keep things in order around here if you want to lessen my burden."

"Alright, leave it to me. If it's you who's saying that, then I guess there's nothing to worry about." Hirata nodded with a smile.

After getting 9 provisional points from yesterday, I'm finally set up to keep a fixed cycle. With four primary spots, we can gain as much as 12 points per day as long as I reinvoke our rights on time, and as much as 4 points on the last day given that the test will conclude at 12:00 NN, around lunch. Adding our points from the first and second day, we'll get a total of 54 provisional points by the end of the exam.

Well, that's what we want, theoretically speaking. Maybe things can change for better or worse depending on how the other classes move. Without a decisive opportunity, I've practically given up on finding the other classes' leaders.

After three days of going around the eastern region, I've got a good grasp on the fastest routes to occupy our spots. They shouldn't take too much time as long as I run at full speed. And with an eight-hour interval for each occupation, there will be plenty of time to rest.

"You guys will be in charge of scouting the unexplored area way up north. You got a copy of the map, right?"

"Yep, this will come in handy," Ike replied.

"Leave it to us, Ayanokouji!" Yamauchi gave me a thumbs up.

Ike, Yamauchi, Onizuka, and Kikuchi-- four guys in total. Well, in the worst-case scenario, Yamauchi and Onizuka might drag the other two down. But other than that, they should be fine.

"We shall be handling the fishery for today, is that right?" Professor asked with a grin.

"You seem confident, Professor."

"Well, not that confident, Ayanokouji-dono. Kanji has taught me well, and I've demonstrated my learnings with basic mastery. I might be able to capture a batch of eight fishes if I get serious."

"Oh, that's great already, Professor!" Ike approved excitedly.

When you factor in the amount of time they'll spend on the



fishing dock, it's certainly a lot lesser than what Ike could catch, but given three days of basic fishing lessons, it's not too bad. Ike's a good teacher, too. I've learned a lot from him, especially with fruits and berries.

Along with Professor; Satou, Shinohara, and Matsushita also wanted to try their hands on fishing. Apart from a few names like Airi, Haruka, or Karuizawa and her main group, everyone was taught for at least a couple of hours. To be honest, we've been taking advantage of this river a lot. So much so that I feel like we might run out of fish soon. Well, even if that happens, we got the ocean as another source of food.

4th Day, 8:10 AM.

After the breakfast and our usual roll call, I finally slipped out of everyone's view. With Karuizawa's help, Ibuki's attention was currently occupied.

"And that's done..." I muttered upon reinvoking our right of exclusive possession.

"Kiyotaka-kun."

"Kikyou?"

A lone girl followed me all the way to the spot mechanism.

"You'll... be gone for the whole day, right?" she asked.

"Yep... After I retake the spots, I'll be spending my time exploring the area around Class C and Class A's base camps." I've explained this to her sometime earlier, but I guess there's no harm in making it clear again.

"Mn," she nodded while approaching me. "You'll be having lunch with Ichinose-san's class then?"

"Oh... I wasn't really planning on doing so, but that should be a good idea. And besides, having another meeting with Ichinose might bring us more vital information, especially since they're Class A's neighbor in some way."

"I see..." Kikyou nibbled her lower lip, almost acting fidgety. Arriving in front of me, Kikyou finally looked up with a hesitant expression. "Um, be careful out there..."

Is that what she wanted to say? How considerate of her.

"Yeah. I'll be back later, Kikyou. I'll be counting on you guys to keep things going around here."

I briskly walked away as Kikyou's waving figure faded from my view.

4th Day, 9:43 AM.

Going back down from a different side of the hill, I slowly made my way to the broken trees near Class C's base camp. It was a good



thing that I ran around without my top. Meeting up with people while covered in sweat would just be awkward. I quickly put them back on as soon as I neared the campsite.

"Ayanokouji?"

"Oh, Kanzaki... How are things going here?" I asked.

"We're doing alright, thanks for asking. How about you and Class B?" he asked back, with his usual vigilant expression.

"We're managing, somehow."

"May I ask what you're doing here?"

"A lot of my classmates were assigned to check out the area around our base camp. I did the scouting for them for the past three days, but I figured that getting some lowdowns about the central and western region of the island shouldn't be a bad idea," I explained.

"I see..."

"Don't worry. I'm not planning to spy on you guys in an attempt to find out your leader nor do I plan to steal your resources."

"It's certainly a possibility, but we're not too worried about that. If Ichinose wants to trust you, then I'll support her decision."

"Oh, is that you, Ayanokouji-kun? Funny seeing you here!"

Minamikata Kozue greeted me with a smile. She was with Amikura and Hamaguchi.

"Minamikata, and you two."

"Yo, Ayanokouji. Are you looking for Ichinose?" asked Hamaguchi.

"Ohh? Is that the case, Ayanokouji-kun? You wanna see Honami-chan~?" Amikura playfully raised an eyebrow.

"Well, talking to Ichinose can be considered part of my plan," I replied.

"If you're looking for her, she's helping out some of our classmates up north," said Kanzaki.

"Alright, I guess I'll head there for now. I have something to discuss with her, anyway. See you later."

"Right," he nodded.

"Bye-bye, Ayanokouji-kun!" Amikura yelled as she and Minamikata waved at me.

"See you later," said Hamaguchi.

I saw Ichinose talking to her classmates-- three guys; namely Shibata, Nakanishi, and Sumida. It seems like they were transferring a lot of wooden branches.

"This should be a good place to temporarily store them," instructed Ichinose.

"Phew. We'll be going ahead to where Kobashi and the others are. I think they still need some labor help over there."



"Okay~! Good work, you three. But, it's fine if you decide to take a rest, you know? I'm sure they'll be okay with Moriyama-kun and Watanabe-kun's help," she said.

"You're the one who should rest, Ichinose. You've been tending to everyone since early morning." Shibata shrugged with a grin.

The other two agreed with a laugh.

"Nah, I'll be alright," she dismissed.

"Oh, it seems like we have a visitor," said Nakanishi the moment he noticed me.

"Hey, Ayanokouji!" greeted Shibata.

"Ayanokouji-kun, how's it going?" Ichinose waved her hand as she approached me.

"Was I interrupting something?" I asked.

"No, not at all. We were just finishing up," answered Shibata.

Class C really was a different kind of place. Most of them are as friendly as Kikyou and her group. As someone from another class, it's certainly great to have a group welcome you, but having most of the class treat you nicely is an entirely different feeling. I wonder how Ibuki would act if she ended up here.

"Do you need anything, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Ichinose.

The three guys waved their hands to us as they trailed off in a different direction.

"I don't need anything, strictly speaking, but I thought it would be nice to drop by. I was planning to scout around Class A's area before sundown."

"Ohhh, isn't that nice? Are you out to find their leader's identity?"

"It would be great if I can do that, but given how they're tackling this test, it's almost an impossibility."

"*Almost* an impossibility, huh? So you do have an idea." Ichinose cocked her head with a smirk.

"Well, Class A is divided into two factions, right? Since Sakayanagi isn't around, those under her might be willing to betray Katsuragi. He's the one leading the class right now, after all."

On the surface, relaying this much information isn't beneficial to me at all. But in return, Ichinose wouldn't hesitate in telling me what she knows about Class A, too.

"Ohh, that's one sneaky plan. But... hmm, I doubt any of them would go as far as to betray the entire class by giving out the leader's name. In the end, they're all in Class A," she mused before laughing bitterly. "That's just me, though! It's only my own perspective about a divided class. If I was the leader of the other faction, I'd still try my best to cooperate for the benefit of everyone."

"That certainly is something that you would do," I nodded. "Well,



I've met Katsuragi a couple of times-- enough to get a gist of what kind of person he is. Katsuragi gave me the impression of a smart and cautious guy, so his line of thinking shouldn't be that different from you... Why would he be at odds with Sakayanagi? Do you know anything about her?"

The two of us walked slowly around the campsite perimeters.

"Hmm... I'm not really close with the two of them, so I can only give you a vague description of my understanding. If I were to break the situation down, I think it's a clash between two opposite mindsets. Liberal versus conservative, gambits versus prudence... attacks versus defense..."

I can already see how Katsuragi is the conventional one... If Sakayanagi is the opposite, then she's quite similar to Ryuen in that regard. The chairman's daughter, huh? I wonder what kind of person she'll be...?

"I think I have a better picture of their conflict now. It all depends on how they've instructed their classmates. If Class A wanted to keep its position, unity is necessary. So there's very little chance for someone in either faction to commit treachery that will affect the entire class."

"That's true. There are still three and a half days left until the exam ends, though. Our class is fine with turtling up like this as long as everyone gets through the week without any issues. We figured that trying to find out Class A and D's leaders would be too risky in many ways," she shrugged.

Ichinose and I continued talking by discussing the situations of our classes. We mutually decided to ignore the topic of spots because of its direct ties to the leader.

"The only thing I can probably say is that everything's alright with us when it comes to the spot mechanics. I'm really sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. I can't tell you anything more than that."

"Ah no, it's fine. I never really planned on exchanging specific information about that, anyway. Horikita might scold me if I say anything unnecessary, too."

Ichinose chuckled in response.

No matter how close we are at this point, leading the class gives us the ironclad responsibility to be on guard with everyone outside. It's a very natural response coming from someone as capable as Ichinose Honami.

"By the way, Ichinose, do you have any clue about what's going on with Class D? I didn't have the time to check on them yesterday."

"Class D, huh? I went there with some of my classmates, yesterday... It seems like they're still at it, albeit with lesser resources." Ichinose touched her cheek as she spoke. "We haven't



checked on them yet, but they shouldn't get past today if my guess is right."

"I'll be heading there right now, actually. I can come along if you want to send some of your classmates to scout out the beach-- only if it's alright with you guys, though."

"Oh, no, it's totally fine. I kinda wanna see their current state for myself, so I think I'll go, too. It might give us some sort of hint on what Ryuuen-kun really wants to do." Ichinose said in a somber tone.

"You think Ryuuen has a plan?"

"Well, he went ahead and stirred up some chaos for our classes... I doubt someone like Ryuuen-kun would back out from the exam just like that. We should be able to confirm some things once we really see everyone in his class retire."

To think that she'd infer things this far... I don't know how much information Ichinose holds on him, but as expected, her intelligence is amazing. If it weren't for her being kind to a fault, Ichinose might be a much more dangerous opponent than Ryuuen or Katsuragi.

After informing Kanzaki and the other Class C students, it was decided that, for some reason, Ichinose and I will go alone.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 10.2 - A First for Everything

Ichinose and I traveled without any rush. The two of us walked side-by-side, chatting about the hardships of being a class leader. It wasn't too different from what we've been talking about back at school.

"It's weird. Our roles are the same, but completely different at the same time," she chuckled.

"Horikita and I are split on thinking up of strategies and whatnot while Hirata is focused on babysitting the class," I said.

Well, in the meantime, I'm the one who's mostly doing the thinking, but time will surely come where it'll be Horikita's job to do so.

"Oh, I can relate to that! But apart from '*babysitting*', as you called it, Kanzaki-kun and I are also split with the brainy stuff. He's very considerate about my opinions."

"You're amazing, after all. *Sigh*... I can't picture myself doing Hirata's job in a million years. I'm fine with consultations whenever my classmates need my advice, but you and Hirata are on another level."

"Ahaha! It's not that hard, I think. You're friends with your whole class, too, right? I'm sure you'll be okay."

"Yeah... But of course, there will be some things that I just can't help them with."

"Oh? What is it, what is it?" Ichinose asked with enthusiasm.

"Ughh... I'd rather not talk about it..." I rolled my eyes in revulsion. "So, no."

Seeing this type of expression from me must've been entertaining for Ichinose. I doubt she'd pry if I'd put on a serious face, but my reaction just made her curiosity skyrocket.

I couldn't help it, though. It was a reflex reaction because I wasn't too familiar with the topic.

"Hmm~? That's suspicious, Ayanokouji-kun. C'mon, tell me. It's just the two of us here!" She skipped in front of me before turning around with an adorable smile. "I won't tell anyone, you know~?"

Too cute, this is dangerous. I need to think of sad thoughts. Dying dogs in a movie? My favorite heroine losing? A classmate rejecting



my friendship offer? Crap, it's a mess.

"Has anyone ever confessed their feelings to you, Ichinose?" I asked.

"Eh?"

"Ah, I guess that was a strange question. Of course, tons of guys have already confessed their feelings to you," I shrugged.

"E-Ehh?! No, wait! No, no, no. You're wrong! No guy has ever confessed their feelings to me before!" Ichinose frantically denied.

"Huh? Are you serious? I'm finding that hard to believe, Ichinose."

"I'm telling you the truth!"

Ichinose Honami was cute. She was probably one of the most beautiful girls in our year and I'm sure most of the guys will agree with me. It wasn't weird for many other boys to have feelings for her.

But then, it slowly started to make sense. Ichinose's personality was something that attracted people, but at the same time, put them at arm's length. If you were in Class C, you'll become good friends with her, but wanting a romantic relationship isn't realistic given how she treats them. Ichinose tends to look after them like a reliable senior instead of a classmate. It's even more so if you're not in Class C. If an outsider develops feelings for Ichinose, her reputation will pressure that person and would probably make them too scared to confess their feelings.

In other words, Ichinose Honami was too out-of-reach for them.

"Well... There is one... actually..." Ichinose lightly scratched her cheek with one finger.

"Oh, really? How did it go?" I asked.

"Hmm... Knowing you, I doubt you'd go around babbling to others, so I guess I can tell you the story."

Ichinose started sharing her first confession experience with me as we walked around the dense forest.

"You see... I got a letter from a classmate. When I read the letter, I immediately knew that the sender was... a girl," she narrated. "Since she was also from Class C, there's no way I can share it with anyone in my class... Not that I planned to do so, anyway."

Ichinose faced me with a smile.

"I struggled so hard at that time, you know? I was debating whether I should ask for your help."

"Wait, me?"

"Yep~! I had this stupid idea of having you pretend as my boyfriend."

"That's really stupid, coming from you," I teased.

"Geez, I know already!" she pouted adorably. "If you're curious about the sender's identity, it was Chihiro-chan... All I wanted was



to lessen the pain since I planned on rejecting her. I did some research and found out that a rejection would hurt less if the object of affection was already in a relationship... But in the end, I realized that being dishonest would just hurt both of us more in the long run."

Shiranami Chihiro, huh? So that's why she always acted guarded around me... I guess I was worried about nothing.

"Yeah... I think so, too." I sighed in agreement.

With a knowing smirk, Ichinose shot a glance towards me.

"Love-- this is the topic you were talking about, weren't you?"

"Hey, I like love as a topic... It's the confession part that I dislike... Too much pressure and negative emotions..." I groaned.

"Fufun~! Well, I've shared my story, so it's your turn to talk!" Ichinose posed while pointing a finger at me. "No pressure, no pressure~. No negative emotions, too. Just tell me a casual story."

"Yes, yes..." I sighed once more. "You see, I've never had anyone say anything like that to me before, as well. But yesterday, a girl from my class, Inogashira, confessed to me."

"O-Ohh! Yesterday?! That's super recent! I know Inogashira-san, too. She's a close friend of Kushida-san, right?"

"Yeah... Apparently, she sees me that way. Of course, I blanked out for a second. Even though the events prior to the confession led me to expect it, actually hearing the words still stunned me."

"So, how did it go?" she asked.

"I didn't really see Inogashira that way, so I decided to reject her."

"I see... So it's the same with me, then." Ichinose sighed as she looked up to the sky. "It feels awful, doesn't it? Rejecting someone, I mean. It feels *weird*."

I hope that Inogashira and I can continue being friends. I'm sure Ichinose was the same with Shiranami. And given how I've seen them interact recently, Ichinose seems to have succeeded in doing so.

"Well, yeah, it feels awful... We're intentionally hurting someone else's feelings, after all," I shrugged. "But '*weird*', huh? I bet it'd be even weirder to accept someone's confession. Being in a dating relationship is completely unfamiliar territory to me."

"That's true for both of us, but I doubt the two people involved in the relationship would find it weird. After all, they like each other. It's pretty interesting, in my opinion."

"So even Ichinose Honami is interested in things like dating," I joked.

"Hey, that can be considered an insult, you know? As a young maiden, of course, I'm interested in dating..." Ichinose turned away with a bitter smile. "But it's not like I have the time to think about



that right now. I have a responsibility with my class, and they're much more important to me."

Spoken like a leader.

This was the type of person Ichinose Honami was. She was a reliable central figure for her class, much like how Hirata was to ours. I wonder... What drives them? What motivates them to take on such a self-sacrificing role?

"I'm surprised, Ayanokouji-kun-- that Inogashira-san was actually the first girl who's ever confessed to you. Hmm... but knowing about your state back in middle school, I think it makes sense."

"I mean, I am too, with you. I was so sure that you'd at least get one confession per week."

"That's too much!"

Ichinose and I continued poking fun at each other as we approached the beach. Our first confessions, huh? The feeling was indeed strange, but I guess there's a first for everything.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 10.3 - Enemy Territory

"Well... I guess we should've expected this."

Ichinose pursed her lips, looking bored. All we could see in the former campsite was a big empty space. Only a couple of things were left, like the tents provided by the school and the barbecue stand. A few Class D students were still playing in the water, but it was just a matter of when they'd leave.

"Ryuuen-kun really did it, huh? I have to admit, it's quite an impressive strategy. They didn't even experience a single moment of hardship."

"They really optimized their vacation. I thought they'd be desperate for class points for, but that doesn't seem to be the case at all," I shrugged.

"There's no way we can find Class D's leader now, can we?"

"Probably. If all of them are gone, we'd have no chance to find even a single clue."

"Well, I think I'm okay with their decision, though." Ichinose smiled warmly. "Kaneda-kun has been helping us for the past few days now. If he and Ibuki-san can finally retire, the two of them would be able to relax back on the ship."

"That's true. It'd best to inform them about this later," I nodded.

Ibuki and Kaneda were driven out of their class. If I was in their position, I would want to retire as soon as possible. Class D has 0 points, anyway, so it's not like they'd worry about the penalty. The two of them have no reason to stay on the island anymore.

"Do you think they managed to enjoy their vacation here? The gap between Class D and the other classes would only widen after this. They should've been aware of that," she mused.

"It probably depends on the person. If they don't mind being in Class D, then I guess so. But of course, there might've been some who sympathized with Ibuki and Kaneda, but was too afraid to defy Ryuuen," I replied.

Ichinose and I chatted while walking around the beach.

"Well, regardless of the results, the beaches on this island do seem like good vacation spots." Ichinose playfully wrote something on the sand using the tip of her shoe.

"My class got to play around yesterday on the eastern beach. Some of us had to make do with the river, though."



"Ohh, how enviable!" she said. "The northern beach is near our base camp, so our class might be able to go swimming, too. Everyone's been working really hard... They also deserve some fun time."

"Yeah... Maintaining everyone's morale is key to surviving this exam. Dissatisfaction resulting in discord within the class is the last thing we want to happen." I sighed in agreement.

The view of the ocean felt really nice. I vividly remember the first time I personally laid my eyes on the ocean earlier this year. Walking along the coastline was also an amazing experience. I wonder if *that girl* was okay, though?

Ichinose and I walked back to their base camp while picking out fruits along the way. As expected, Class C invited me to have lunch with them. I still felt awkward and guilty about eating their foraged food, but it's better than putting in some extra effort to eat outside the area.

I exchanged farewells with a lot of my friends in Ichinose's class before finally setting out.

It was surprisingly easy to scale the forest within the mountains. I slipped past the heavily guarded cave entrance and explored the other regions. It was currently 12:08 PM, so I have about four hours before coming back to our base camp and reinvoke our rights on the river spot. That's plenty of time.

Reaching the end of the western mountain was a cliff high enough to kill anyone. I spotted a lot of facilities located near the cave, so it makes sense for Class A to want to monopolize this area.

"There it is..." I muttered after spotting a ladder located in a blindspot.

I tested the ladder's strength using my own. It seems sturdy enough, so I used it to climb down to the bottom. There, I found a small hut and of course, a device. This was a very useful location, not only for its spot but also for the things inside the hut. There were a lot of fishing tackles and rods. They'd be able to catch fish without spending points to buy the necessary equipment. As expected, Class A was occupying this spot. Their class name was instated on the device with also around four hours remaining.

After entering, I noticed something extremely strange. The fishing equipment was unused and the accumulated dust remained. Why wouldn't Katsuragi take advantage of this?

I put that detail at the back of my mind and took three fishing rods. I'm sure Katsuragi would notice the difference even if I meticulously rearrange the placements of the remaining rods, but it's worth the try.



I made my way to the opposite path to hide the fishing rods behind some nearby bushes. After doing so, I turned back to look for the other facilities that I noticed from the boat.

"This tower..."

After walking straight to the backwoods, I stumbled upon an old tower that stood out from the trees.

It was a pretty obvious landmark, so I doubt Katsuragi would carelessly take the spot without any insurance. When I reached the wall of the facility, I saw that the device wasn't occupied. I hypothesized that they would only take this spot every midnight or early morning, which was perfectly reasonable. Katsuragi's prudence was worthy of mention.

"What are you doing here? This place is being used by Class A."

Two guys sprang up from the bushes. It was Class A's Shimazaki Ikkei and Sugio Hiroshi. One of them instantly ran up to the device and checked its status.

Oh, so they were waiting for someone to fall into this trap.

Another guy was hiding in the bushes. I didn't look too keenly at who it was, but he looked like Morishige Takurou.

"It's being used by Class A, huh? Alright, I'll be going then. It's not like I was planning to do anything strange." I turned around and began to walk away.

"Huh? You're Ayanokouji, from Class B. I've seen your name on the exam bulletin and you talked to Katsuragi back on the ship."

"You're Class B's ringleader, aren't you? What are you doing in a place like this?"

One of them brandished a tree branch, thrusting it near my throat. They were trying to threaten me.

"I'm sorry, but we'll have to search you."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. It'd be a pity if Class A gets disqualified from the exam," I replied.

"Disqualified? It's not even an act of violence!"

"Do you want to try me?" I asked.

Forging false evidence on this island was pretty easy and they should be aware of that. If I can make it seem like they hurt me, then Class A is done for. However, it'd be bad if framing them doesn't work. After all, I'm the leader, and the key card is in my pocket. Even with Chabashira-sensei's help, it'd be hard to bypass an actual investigation. If they were proven innocent in the end, my identity as the leader will be known to Class A. I could only hope that they take my bluff.

"Tch..."

"Just sit tight, you two. Katsuragi's strategy was to avoid class conflict, right?"



"We don't take orders from the likes of Katsuragi. Sakayanagi is Class A's representative."

The two of them squinted in irritation.

"Look, it's normal to scout around the enemy territory. Class A has done the same with our river and we didn't even bother you, right? So why don't you just turn around and wait for your next victim? I don't have the time to entertain you two." I walked away with a shrug.

Shimazaki and Sugio could only glare silently as I disappeared from their sight.

"It seems like that's it for the western region. It's a shame that I didn't find any more spots-- occupied or not. I'm sure Katsuragi had a lot more at his disposal."

It's a shame, really. This environment is a big handicap for my senses. It was extremely hard to detect other people's presence unless they were near. I need more time to get used to it. With that, I went around and arrived back at the place where I hid the fishing rods.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 10.4 - Vital Information

4th Day, 3:43 PM.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun, you're back," said Satou.

"How's everything going here?" I asked.

"Hmm, the usual, I guess? Everyone's been doing their tasks without any problems, so I think it's a good thing," she replied with a shrug.

I decided to check on my classmates and found out some nice things. According to Ike's report, their group found some weird places but there were no devices around them. It's a pity, but at least they lit up some more parts of the map and brought in some food.

After surveying the campsite, I finally found Ibuki, who was sitting on top of a tree.

"Hey, Ibuki," I called.

Ibuki jumped down skillfully. I noticed that she was fit, but the more I observe her, it's become more apparent that she isn't your average high school girl.

"You need me for something?" she asked.

"Well, your entire class just retired, so I thought it would be a good idea for you to retire as well."

"Damn... So they really did it..." Ibuki clicked his tongue. "I don't really want to see their faces, but it's better than being a burden here, I guess. You'll have one less mouth to feed when I'm gone."

Ibuki shrugged her shoulders with a smirk.

"We didn't really mind your presence here, but I personally think it's better for you to ease up. The retirement penalty wouldn't affect you or Kaneda, anyway."

"Kaneda?" Ibuki looked at me as she tilted her head in confusion.

"Class C picked him up, apparently. He was driven out just like you, right?"

"Yeah, he was. We were smacked by Ryuen at the same time, so of course, I know he's like me. I didn't expect him to wound up in Class C's camp, though."

"Well, Ichinose has probably informed him about Class D's retirement by now. I'd like to think that he'd want to retire, too."

"Yeah... I would rather sleep on a proper bed. My back's starting to ache a whole lot since we've been here," she complained.



"A lot of my classmates doubted you at first, but in the end, it seems like you really weren't a spy," I said.

"Yeah, I'm not," Ibuki replied as she looked at me straight in the eye.

Following my talk with Ibuki was a small announcement. It was finally time for everyone in Class B to know what was up with Class D. After relaying the details to Hirata and Kikyou, they helped me explain everything to our classmates.

"That's really crazy..."

"Ryuuen is nuts."

"I'm sure they had fun, though."

"Well, their fun won't last long if they stay behind in class points."

The only ones who managed to see Ibuki off were Kikyou, Hirata, and me. We informed everyone about her retirement after. Unsurprisingly, everyone thought that her decision to retire was the obvious choice.

I only stayed at the camp for a short time, however. I needed to run out and reinvoké our rights again. When I took a bath after returning, the sky was already dyed in orange. This time, I decided to just take it easy with everyone. I helped around with the chores and did some fishing in the process. I also hung out with Hirata and the others, as well as Karuizawa and her group. It almost felt like a normal school day but in a different setting.

"Can you drop it, Yamauchi?"

I was walking around the campsite when I suddenly heard Akito's voice.

"Huh? Drop what?"

Ike, Yamauchi, and Akito were having a conversation in a secluded part of the woods, a little bit away from our base camp.

"Haruka and Airi have been complaining since the other day. They're uncomfortable with your incessant staring."

"The hell? I wasn't even doing that!"

"C'mon, man. I've seen you do it. Even Ken did at some point. Let's not make this into a big deal, so just stop it."

"Aren't you getting full of yourself, Miyake? You're close with the two of them, right? Maybe you're the one who's doing the staring?" Yamauchi asked scornfully.

"Haruki, let's just go. Whether you're doing it or not doesn't matter now. You've been warned, so let's get back to camp," said Ike.

"Huh? Wouldn't you usually side with me on this one, Kanji?" Yamauchi faced him with a displeased tone. "Ah, I see. You were hanging out with Shinohara earlier, right? Do you like her or



something? Is that why you don't want in on this?"

"Sh-Shinohara?! There's no way I'd like that uggo!" Ike denied it in a panic. "Anyway, let's just drop this topic, alright? Sorry about this, Miyake. We'll be heading back now."

"It's fine. Just tone down the perverted attitude for once, please..."

"Tch, the hell? Acting all arrogant just because you're close with some girls..." Yamauchi muttered spitefully while looking at Akito.

Despite hearing it, he didn't seem to care.

"Yo, Akito." I approached him after the other two disappeared.

"Kiyotaka? Oh... Did you hear everything?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did. I'm assuming that Airi and Haruka asked you to do that?"

"They didn't tell me directly, but those two were pretty vocal with their discomfort. I thought I'd confront Yamauchi as soon as possible before Ken's the one who gets pissed off," he shrugged.

Ohh... You could even say that he did Yamauchi a favor.

"Although it's pretty much inevitable for any guy in our class to give Airi and Haruka that kind of extra attention, Yamauchi's game is just on another level," I said.

"The guy lacks self-awareness, and he's childish and immature. Dealing with him is like dealing with a kid, so it's better to just tell him straight out." Akito sighed while looking in the direction where Ike and Yamauchi retreated. "At least Ike's attitude improved a bit."

"The incident back in July must've stuck with him if that's the case. They'd probably get shunned by the whole class if our points dipped due to their carelessness."

"Ike learned from his mistakes... but Yamauchi..."

"Well, it's only the fourth month of our first year. He'll have more time to reflect on his actions."

*Objectively speaking, I think it's better to just get rid of him.*

4th Day, 8:04 PM.

I took advantage of the roll call to ask some questions while everyone was present. I want them to hear some clarifications from Chabashira-sensei herself.

"Chabashira-sensei, is it alright if I ask you a few questions?"

Everyone's attention was instantly caught.

"Sure, what do you want to know?"

"I was just curious about the matters of retirement."

"Oh, what about it?"

"A leader can only be changed with a justifiable reason, correct?"

"Yes, you're right."

"Is retirement a justifiable reason?"

"Unfortunately, no. What the school meant by a '*justifiable reason*'



is the leader's *"immediate capability"* to do his or her task." Chabashira-sensei shook her head in response. "On the contrary, a student can retire even with just a *"potential risk"* as his or her reason. That's why Kouenji was able to retire even if his unwell condition wasn't apparent at first glance."

"So you're saying that even if the leader is on the ship due to retirement, the rules won't permit the class to replace him or her. After all, they're not incapacitated in any way."

"That's correct," she replied.

I see... For example, I can certainly choose to retire right now, by using the potential risk on my physical and mental health as a reason, much like Class D and Kouenji... However, since I was fine at the moment, I still have the *immediate capability* to do my part as the leader, albeit stranded on the ship.

In other words, it doesn't matter if the leader is not allowed to go back to the island. If he or she wasn't diagnosed with anything after a quick medical check-up, they cannot be replaced.

"However, you'll miss out on a lot of provisional points if you do that. After all, even if another person possesses the leader's key card, he or she will not be able to take a spot. Each mechanism has a small camera placed on the device. If any of you can remember, the rest area way back on the southern beach has a special facility to confirm every spot registration."

Chabashira-sensei must be talking about the tent with many computers and school staff.

"Coincidentally, the opposite is also true. Even if you're sick or injured badly, retirement is still just an option. Unless your condition is deemed critical by our medical personnel, you can opt to not retire at all."

With that explanation, Chabashira-sensei remained still, ready for more questions.

"Thank you very much, Chabashira-sensei."

Most of my classmates circled around us and listened intently. This conversation wasn't really needed to be heard, but it was a good introduction. Now, I will be asking the real questions that my classmates must know the answer to.

"Chabashira-sensei, I'm sorry, but I have other questions. Can I take some more of your time? They might not be too related to the exam, though."

"No problem. Even if they're not related to the exam, as long as the questions aren't strictly unnecessary, I am still able to answer them."

Horikita and Hirata had very serious expressions. The entire Class B camp was silent and the only sounds we could hear were the



crackling noises of burnt wood and the loud cries of male cicadas trying to attract their mate.

"I was able to buy intangible things using our class points way back in April, so I'm pretty sure I could do the same with private points. Please correct me if I'm wrong."

"No, you're right. In fact, buying things using class points is exceedingly rare. As I stated back then, you can buy anything inside the school. Since private points can be considered as your pocket money, they are the orthodox currency that everyone should use."

Because of what I did back then, I'm sure most of my classmates are wondering about the boundaries of point usage.

"Is it possible to buy your own placement in a different class using private points?"

My classmates gasped audibly, just like that time during our first day in school. It gave me a feeling of *deja vu*.

"It is possible." Chabashira-sensei nodded in confirmation.

"Holy crap! That's a shortcut to Class A!" yelled Ike.

"You're right!"

"I'm sure it'll be expensive, though..."

"How much does it cost, Sensei?" asked Horikita.

"20 million private points." Chabashira-sensei's voice echoed throughout the base camp. After a split second of complete silence, my classmates strongly voiced their reactions.

"T-That's insane!"

"Twenty... mil-"

"Is that even possible?"

"What's with the sour faces? If the cost was affordable, then there would be a hundred and sixty students in Class A every graduation." Chabashira-sensei extinguished their noises with her words.

"Who cares about buying a seat to Class A, anyway?" At that moment, Karuizawa joined in on the conversation with a flashy entry statement. "We have Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san. And of course, we also have Hirata-kun~!"

She clung to his arm with a huge smile.

"W-We have Kikyuu-chan, too!" followed Ike.

Kikyuu-chan?

"Yeah!" The boys agreed with him, of course.

"I'm sure we'll reach Class A soon enough. We've got the best leaders on our side," said Mori.

"Heck yeah!"

"I agree!"

Chabashira-sensei smirked before asking me a question in return.

"Why did you ask about buying a seat in a different class now, of all times?"



Her smile implied that *I* wanted to transfer classes which earned some anxious reactions from my classmates.

"It's been on my mind since April but I never got around to asking anyone. I thought this was a good time to do so."

"I see."

The atmosphere was starting to get fun. With a slight bow of gratitude from me and Hirata, Chabashira-sensei turned around and walked away.

Well, those were some insanely helpful information. I finally got some clarifications about the vaguer parts of the rules. It shouldn't take too long before things start to get in motion.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 10.4.2 - Past Midnight

5th Day, 12:00 AM.

I woke in time for the spot registration. The remaining people from the night watch gave their goodnights before finally retreating inside the tents.

Since I was well-prepared to move around in the dark, running through the forest with a single flashlight wasn't too much trouble, especially with the moonlight's help.

It was currently 1:51 AM, and I just got back to our base camp after retaking the hilltop spot. At this time of the night, *campfires were very easy to spot*. So upon return, I was surprised when I saw my mini-campfire illuminating the area.

"Haruka?"

There, I saw my friend sitting on a branch.

"Yawn~... Kiyopon? You're here... Welcome back~." The cheerful Haruka tried to sound cheerful, but her sleepiness was too evident.

She was part of tonight's night watch who saw me off earlier, but they're normally up only until midnight.

"Why are you still awake?"

"Hmm... I was waiting for you." Haruka answered with a typical Haruka-grin.

"Well, I'm here now, so we should go to sleep. It would do you good to get inside the tent. The night's getting pretty chilly." I hugged my upper body, gesturing that I was feeling cold.

"Ooh, that's true. The temperature's dropped quite a bit." Haruka responded as she embraced her own upper body. "But can we hang out for a bit before that? We haven't really talked much for the past few days, have we?"

"Well, if it's only for a little bit, then I guess there's no problem."

I tried to take my seat across Haruka, but she stopped me with a "Wait-".

"What?"

"The fire is making my eyes itch. Let's just get rid of it, Kiyopon."

I nodded with little hesitation. Flames from a campfire can cause eye irritation or even inflammation with extended exposure. If Haruka is feeling the early symptoms, then it's better to just put it out. Of course, the cold would become even more apparent.

After dousing the tiny campfire, I used the flashlight to illuminate



our surroundings.

"It's fine, Kiyopon. My eyes got used to the dark for quite some time now."

"I see. I'll save the battery then, since my eyes are alright, too."

Because of our location, the moonlight pierced through the trees very easily. It shouldn't take long for anyone to adjust.

"Okay~. Let's find a better place to sit then."

Haruka stood up and stretched her body. Since she didn't zip up her jacket, some things inevitably stood out. Because of the darkness, however, I could only make out the general shape of her body in my periphery.

In the end, it was decided that the two of us will sit on the grass, leaning our backs against a sturdy tree. This place probably had the best view of the sky. The amount of light was bright enough to make us recognize each other's faces.

Haruka and I sat down side by side with our shoulders touching.

"You've been working hard, Kiyopon," she said.

"It's the least I could do. Everyone's doing their part, so I didn't want to work on things half-heartedly."

"Yep, all of us can see that," Haruka replied with a smile. "So I... decided to work harder, too..."

Haruka leaned as she yawned.

Being in the same friend group, Haruka and I have known each other for a long time now. She's always been the one to do things at her own pace and that trait of hers affects everyone in the Ayanokouji group. It's the reason why all of us get to have the most fun out of every hangout, no matter what we do. It doesn't matter whether it's karaoke, shopping, or studying. If Haruka's with us, things would never get stale.

As the girl who didn't really want to get involved with a lot of people, Haruka really took care of the ones she recognized as friends.

That's why I really admire her behavior today. Haruka took an extra step to do more than what she is expected to do. She put in the effort to quickly finish her own tasks in order to go around and lend the others a helping hand. Those were the words of Hirata, who looked after the class while I was away.

Haruka voluntarily went out of her comfort zone for the sake of Class B.

I'm sure she found a way to make it fun for herself, but physically, it must've been very demanding. When the night fell, Haruka was also one of the night watchers. So her body must be extremely tired at this point.

"You're too worn out, Haruka. I think you should go to sleep



now."

Haruka didn't respond to my words. Her weight became even more pronounced against my body. That's when I realized that she was already fast asleep.

"You shouldn't have forced yourself, idiot Haruka," I muttered while glancing at the sleeping girl beside me.

What should I do in this situation? Should I gently wake her up? Should I carry her back to the girls' tent?

Haruka's head comfortably leaned itself on my shoulders while my mind was having a little panic attack.

*\*Yawn\*...*

Before I knew it, the dizziness also slowly crept up to me. Before I resigned myself to sleep, I took off my jacket and put it over Haruka's upper body. I hope either of us gets to wake up before anyone else does. Even I am aware that this current blend of situations was a recipe for disaster.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 11.1 - Brewing Trouble

"Ayanokouji? Hasebe? Why are you guys sleeping out here?"

My body felt the extreme coldness of the place despite the usual humidity. I slowly opened my eyes and saw Yukimura's curious expression.

"I thought there was enough space inside the tents?" he asked.

I looked at my wristwatch and saw that the time was 5:07 AM.

"Haruka fell asleep while leaning on this tree... and then I kinda did the same," I reasoned.

"Huh? You could've just woken her up when you found her."

"Well, the thing is... We were already in this position before she fell asleep." I glanced at Haruka's adorable sleeping face.

"Oh... I see." Yukimura nodded understandingly. "I don't know if this is an offensive question but, are you two dating?"

Even the dense Yukimura would eventually arrive at that conclusion.

"No... The two of us just decided to talk for a bit. But... we were more exhausted than we thought, so this happened..."

That's the last bit of excuse that I can possibly tell him. I hope Yukimura believes me... It's the truth, anyway.

"I understand," he nodded. "But the two of you need to get up soon. It's already the fifth day. We're almost there."

Yukimura walked back to his tent, probably to get something. I gently moved Haruka's head off my shoulder. I should wash up and get ready for the next day.

"Mmm... Kiyopon... Miyacchi... Kencchin... get 'em~... Airi... get behind me, I'll protect you~..." she muttered.

Huh...? What in the world is this girl dreaming about?

I stood up and stretched for a bit before scanning our surroundings. It doesn't seem like anyone else was up, which was expected given the time. The earliest ones were always either Yukimura or Hirata, so I wasn't worried even if I slept in for a bit.

"Hm?"

I noticed something strange after looking at the girls' tent.

"Yukimura, is there anyone else who's awake? Like someone who went to the toilet or something?" I asked.

The tent's entrance wasn't the same from what I could remember. If someone went to the toilet around 2-4 in the morning, I doubt



they could've noticed me and Haruka since this place was a blindspot from the girls' tent in particular. But that's taking their morning dizziness into account.

If they woke up after that timeframe, then...

"I don't think so..." Yukimura answered in an instant.

That's a relief. It seems like I was overthinking things. At least we avoided some troublesome misunderstandings.

"Ah, but I remember Kushida getting out of their tent right after I went out from ours. She immediately went back inside, though."

Ah.

"She went back inside?"

"Yeah... She stepped out and walked around for a few seconds before going back in a hurry. Since she's still inside, then I'm pretty sure she went back to sleep." Yukimura pondered while narrowing his eyes a bit. "Hmm, but that's strange... Kushida was very energetic when she greeted me. It didn't feel like she was sleepy at all."

Oh...

As the time passed by, our classmates woke up one by one until Haruka finally got up herself. The others didn't really mind seeing her asleep by the tree since a few of our classmates have done the same before.

When Haruka came to, she hastily approached me with a panicked face.

"K-Kiyopon... Was I-? Were we-?"

At least complete your sentences.

"Yeah, we fell asleep last night together," I replied, cutting her off. "My bad. I think should've woken you up."

Haruka's cheeks instantly became flushed, and her hold on my jacket felt uncomfortably tight just by looking at it. Hey, you might rip it off...

She looked around for possible eavesdroppers. Seeing her pinkish cheeks, I asked another question.

"You didn't get catch a cold or anything, right?"

"I don't think I can catch a cold at this point..." she answered with a slightly strained voice.

"That's good. You might wanna give my jacket back to me before you tear it apart, then."

"A-Ah, sorry."

After handing it back, Haruka regained her composure and cleared her throat.

"How about you, Kiyopon? You didn't use any blankets, right? Are you alright?" she asked after returning my jacket.



"I'm fine. You don't need to worry about that."

"Alright, that's great. I don't want to be the one responsible for our leader getting sick, after all." Haruka chuckled with a smirk. "Later~!"

And there she goes. Just like that, the usual Haruka was back in business. She walked in the girls' direction and did her chores with Airi.

Time passed by and all of us had breakfast right before the roll call. Kikyō acted the same as usual when she woke up. I don't know if she saw me and Haruka in that state, but I chose not to ask. I might dig myself a deeper hole for that.

5th Day, 10:09 AM.

I just got back from the hilltop. Everything seems to be going well for us. Since I have a lot of time before the next round of spot-taking, I decided to help out with finding food.

"Kiyotaka-kun, we found some nice fruit-bearing trees around here. There might be a lot of them left," said Airi.

I decided to go with Airi after we split into two smaller groups.

"I see. I haven't really explored this place in detail, so you'll be my guide."

"Okay, leave it to me." Airi nodded with a smile.

If she could smile like this in the classroom, I'm sure Airi will make more friends than she could ever imagine.

She told me everything I needed to know while traversing this part of the forest. It was refreshing to see Airi try her best to talk, so I praised her for it. After some time has passed, Airi and I decided to sit beside a nearby tree to rest.

"It would've been nice if I brought my camera with me. It's too bad they confiscated it." Airi lamented with a bitter smile.

Airi's camera was personal, just like her phone. It wasn't like Ibuki's camera, which was bought with points. I knew this fact after finding the same model in the manual.

"That's true. You would've made a lot of memories with Haruka and the others."

"Why are you excluding yourself? You're the Ayanokouji group's leader, you know?" chuckled Airi.

"When did that happen? Weren't we just an ordinary friend group?" I asked in surprise.

"Akito-kun and Ken-kun decided it, apparently. Haruka-chan and I didn't have the energy to disagree."

"Well, that sounds like something that those two would say..." I replied while pondering about it myself. "Isn't it funny, though? Akito's slowly getting infected by Ken's wildness."



"Yeah, but on the other hand, Ken-kun is acting more composed at times, just like Akito-kun."

"It's probably a good thing if their qualities are rubbing off on each other," I shrugged.

As long as Akito doesn't adopt the violent side of Ken's nature, I'm sure it'll be alright. It's not like Akito's the type of guy who's easily influenced, anyway.

"Yep!" Airi sighed with a grin. "It's really fun when everyone's hanging out together. I never thought I could be this close with a lot of people."

"We told you before, right? You have what it takes to make friends. You just have to put yourself out there with confidence."

I'm sure it's not that simple for everyone, but Airi, with their help, had started to bud out from her own shell.

"Mn... Unlike before, I can finally have different thoughts about myself... Like how I can be a good friend to Haruka-chan and you guys. It's all thanks to you, Ayanokouji-kun. When we first met, you talked to me without thinking that I was strange. You might think that's it's a simple and mundane event, but it left an impact on me."

As someone who didn't really talk with anyone in the class, I'm sure it did.

"I thought you *were* strange, though," I teased.

"E-Eh?!" Airi flinched back in horror.

"I'm kidding."

"Geez, you-!" Airi pouted cutely.

Guys like Yamauchi would probably become head over heels for Airi if they saw her like this.

"Well, at that time, when I got physically close to you, I noticed that the lenses on your glasses didn't have any distortion. That's when I knew that they were fake. You can probably count that as strange."

"Oh... Yeah, you're right. I was being careful about that, too. It's not something that one would immediately notice, but I was expecting to get found out eventually. But what's even stranger is that you never confronted me about it."

Airi chuckled once again. If she could do all these things without her shield, I'm sure many people will open themselves up to her. In some ways, she might resemble Kikyuu but with a more authentic vulnerable exterior.

"Have you considered coming to class without them? You look really cute when you're not wearing glasses, you know? That's what the four of us have been telling you, especially Haruka."

"Y-Yes, I know... Haruka-chan's been convincing me to do so, but I'm still quite shy..." Airi relaxed her back against the tree and gazed



at the rustling leaves. "Well, maybe it's more accurate to say that I'm scared."

"I see... It's good to take things at your own pace."

"Just like Haruka-chan, right?"

"Yep, just like her. I'm sure you can do it, Airi."

"Mn..." Airi meekly nodded.

After our group got back, Class B proceeded with lunch.

The fifth day was slowly getting by. Given the circumstances, I should make my move soon. During the fourth night, which was last night, *he* made his first mistake. It's time for him to reap the punishment.



## SS.11 - Kushida Kikyou: Regret and Relief

2nd Day, 3:27 PM.

"I think... I will go first, after all." Kokoro-chan's voice echoed throughout the tent's interior.

"Are you sure about this, Kokoro-chan?" asked Ryuuko-chan.

"Of course. I've always wanted to confess my feelings for Ayanokouji-kun since last month. I just haven't mustered up enough courage to do so."

"You're not forcing yourself, are you?" Kayoko-chan asked with concern. "I mean, we're just the same. I also decided to confess to him back then, right?"

"I'll be okay, Kayoko-chan. I like Ayanokouji-kun... I'm sure it'll be sad if he rejects me, but I want him to know how I feel. I'm ready to get hurt."

Kokoro-chan is amazing. She was usually one of the shy ones, but she even beat the girls on Karuizawa-san's group in terms of having a spine.

"You don't need to be so negative, Kokoro-chan. Nothing is set in stone, so you still have a chance."

That's what I say, but I almost know for certain that Kiyotaka-kun will reject her. With the grueling battle ahead, I'm sure he won't let anyone in his or my friend group get caught in the crossfire.

This island exam puts everything into perspective. If future class competitions are this complicated and large-scale, being in a relationship with someone might prove to be a mistake... This is especially true for Kiyotaka-kun, who's against the entirety of Class A and Class D's Ryuen-kun.

Well, even if he does accept her confession and Kokoro-chan becomes his girlfriend, I'm sure Kiyotaka-kun will find a way to protect her while leading the class.

It'll be alright since it's him... I'll remain as his friend so I'll be alright, as well... That's right. I'll be alright...

"I mean, we all like him, to some degree. I'm sure Kikyou-chan's the same. She just doesn't want to admit it." Kayano-chan teased me with a grin.

"I-I've never denied anything, you know? I do like Kiyotaka-kun, but we only see each other as friends," I replied. "I've already said that before."



"We're not talking about that kind of like. We're talking about dating and flirting and stuff like that," she said.

"I want to go on a date with Ayanokouji-kun at least once." Ryuuko-chan daydreamed with a sigh.

"It'll be boring, you know? Kiyotaka-kun's not the type of guy who's good at that," I said.

"Hoh? Have you gone out with him before, Kikyou-chan?" Kayoko-chan asked with a smirk.

"Uh... A bunch of times, I guess."

And gasps of surprise ensued. Naturally, they all reacted in that way.

"And you never told us? Kikyou-chan, how shrewd~." Kayano-chan said sarcastically as she tugged my arm.

"A-As expected of Kikyou-chan... Uhm, how did they go...?" asked Mii-chan.

"It's normal and fun, I guess. But even if Kiyotaka-kun says he had fun, too... It doesn't really show in his face."

"Oh, yeah... We haven't really seen him smile genuinely, like how Hirata-kun does."

I initially thought that Hirata-kun was one of those fake guys, but he doesn't give off the same vibe as them. As a friend, I never thought someone like him could exist. I thought it was impossible for a guy like him to not have even a shred of ego.

But as a class, I think it's a good thing as long as we have Kiyotaka-kun. After all, if a guy like Hirata-kun leads us, we'll never get a leg up on any class. It's similar with Class C and Ichinose-san, but at least she has Kanzaki-kun on her side.

And of course, I'm sure he's hiding something under that perfect princely face of his. It's simply impossible for his extreme altruism to be natural... Or else, he'd be broken by now.

"You haven't seen him smile, Kikyou-chan? I thought he'd show that side of him to you, at least," asked Ryuuko-chan.

"No, unfortunately." I smiled bitterly.

All of them were naturally surprised.

Is Kiyotaka-kun even capable of smiling like that, though? I mean, obviously, he should be able to physically do it. We've seen him smile bitterly a lot. Maybe it's just a matter of events.

"So even Kikyou-chan hasn't seen him smile yet..." muttered Mii-chan.

"I wonder if Sakura-san and Hasebe-san already made him smile like that?" mused Kokoro-chan.

"If that's true, then they're really lucky..."

"Ayanokouji-kun's smile..." Now it was Mii-chan who was daydreaming.



Like Kokoro-chan, Mii-chan is the same type of shy girl who isn't confident about confessing. She's been vocal about being inexperienced when it comes to love. Well, Mii-chan's personality reflects that a lot already. She developed her feelings for Kiyotaka-kun on the first day of school, after all. If he didn't confront Chabashira-sensei in such a cool manner, Mii-chan might've fallen for Hirata-kun instead.

"Alright, I've made up my mind. I'll confess my feelings to Ayanokouji-kun tomorrow." Kokoro-chan clenched her fists with determination.

"We'll be rooting for you, Kokoro-chan, the bravest girl of Class B!" cheered Ryuuko-chan.

"I'm starting to get motivated about confessing now. Kokoro-chan's courage is inspiring," said Kayoko-chan.

"Do your best, Kokoro-chan," followed Mii-chan.

"If you become his girlfriend, allow me to have swimming matches with him sometimes~!" Kayano-chan hugged her with a smile.

Every girl inside this tent feels something romantic for Kiyotaka-kun. I'm sure it's the same with the other girls. It was only natural. It's Kiyotaka-kun, after all. That's also why they're alright with being friendly rivals with each other. Every Class B girl is aware that Kiyotaka-kun is just that popular inside the class.

And of course, that group chat, too...

3rd Day, 6:45 AM.

After a few minutes, Kokoro-chan returned to us while running. She approached us before slightly slowing down to embrace me.

I see... So Kiyotaka-kun rejected her, after all...

"It's alright, Kokoro-chan... It's alright." I stroked her hair gently as she buried her little sniffles in my chest.

Even though I'm someone who's almost completely desensitized to empathy, it still pains me a bit to see her like this. Unlike my disgusting fake female friends back in middle school, I couldn't find it in me to internally mock a genuinely nice girl like Kokoro-chan.

Our group comforted her until she was fine. It's not apparent, but she was a strong girl. I'm sure she'll get over him with time.

*If I confessed my feelings to Kiyotaka-kun, I wonder how I would react when he rejects me...?* I'm sure all of us were thinking about the same thing after seeing Kokoro-chan in this state.

After some time has passed, Kokoro-chan decided to tell us what happened. Long story short, Kiyotaka-kun rejected her because he didn't feel like getting into a relationship. I know it's a bit of a lie. On two separate occasions, Kiyotaka had told me that he was



willing to go out with me.

One possible conclusion is that Kiyotaka-kun had developed feelings for me, but as much as I wanted that to happen, I doubt it. It's probably my role in the class that he's taken into account. Kiyotaka-kun might've deemed me capable enough to be involved in the future class battles, unlike someone innocent like Kokoro-chan.

"It'll be alright, Kokoro-chan. I'm sure you'll find other guys," said Kayano-chan.

"I'll be okay..." Kokoro-chan smiled bitterly. "I know it's weird, but I think I still like Ayanokouji-kun."

"I don't think it's strange at all, you know? Even if Ayanokouji-kun rejects me, too, I don't think I'll stop having a crush on him anytime soon." Kayoko-chan shrugged with an understanding smile.

I guess it's a natural reaction. If your feelings for someone are strong, one rejection won't douse out that fire. Of course, the other way around is also true. I've rejected a bunch of guys before and it's baffling how some of them instantly hated me. It's really disgusting, to be honest. I even rejected them nicely.

4th Day, 8:10 AM.

"And that's done..." Kiyotaka-kun muttered upon reinvoking our right of exclusive possession.

"Kiyotaka-kun," I called.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I followed him here to say goodbye but...

"Kikyou?" He turned around with a slightly surprised expression.

"You'll... be gone for the whole day, right?"

"Yep... After I retake the spots, I'll be spending my time exploring the area around Class C and Class A's base camps."

"Mn," I nodded while approaching him. "You'll be having lunch with Ichinose-san's class then?"

My face is getting hot. This was a now or never moment...

"Oh... I wasn't really planning on doing so, but that should be a good idea. And besides, having another meeting with Ichinose might bring us more vital information, especially since they're Class A's neighbor in some way."

"I see..." I reflexively bit my lip. I wanted to do it, but... but... "Um, be careful out there..."

Hahh~... In the end, I couldn't do it...

"Yeah. I'll be back later, Kikyou. I'll be counting on you guys to keep things going around here."

I felt the pressure of having many girls like the same person that I do. I wanted to get ahead of them. I wanted to be the special one...



That's why I wanted to kiss him... I wanted to kiss Kiyotaka-kun...

I don't know if I'm going to regret letting go of this chance, but right now, I feel relieved. I felt like I refused to do something that might hurt me in the long run...

As Kiyotaka-kun's figure slowly fade from my vision, I thought about our current relationship. I tried to make him conscious of me by indirectly expressing my feelings, but I'm sure Kiyotaka-kun's already aware of that. Unlike most guys, he's not someone that I can manipulate. On the other hand, it would be all too easy for him to manipulate me instead. That's just how smart he is.

I've been trying to gauge out his true feelings for me, implying that there's something underneath what he's showing. It's not just my way of life that's been preventing me from fully committing to my feelings for him, albeit it's the biggest factor. It's also the fact we don't fully trust each other, or at least not yet.

I like Kiyotaka-kun-- I know that... But I can't let my feelings cloud my judgment.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 12.1 - Seeds of Chaos

5th Day, 6:29 PM.

While watching the sky darken bit by bit, I heard Kikyou's footsteps approach me from behind.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun!" she called out cheerfully.

"Kikyou, is everything alright?"

"Yep, Ryuuko-chan and the others are just about done preparing the food. They're all ready to be cooked for later," Kikyou nodded with a smile. "How are you?"

"Oh... I'm fine. You can say that I'm mentally preparing myself for later."

"Later? What will you do?"

I raised my clenched fist in a comedic manner before speaking.

"To do battle."

I'm sure it wasn't funny given my horribly deadpan expression, but Kikyou replied with a chuckle, nonetheless. Of course, I know that Kikyou's chuckle didn't mean that she found my joke funny. She simply understood what I was trying to say.

"Don't do anything reckless, okay?" Kikyou voiced her concern with a gentle expression.

Under normal circumstances, I might've asked her to marry me right then and there.

"I won't. Thanks for worrying about me, Kikyou."

"Mn," she nodded.

It would've been nice to end the conversation on such a wholesome note but...

"By the way, Kiyotaka-kun~..." It was the same happy tone... but why in the world did I suddenly feel chills down my spine?

"Yeah...?"

"It seems like you *slept well* last night," she said.

"It... wasn't that great, really. Everything felt cold."

Like right now.

"Really? You looked really comfortable, though... with Hasebe-san *cozily* sleeping *on* your shoulder, too." Kikyou's smile was still there, but it had a completely different feel to it.

So she saw us, after all.

"It just kinda happened. The two of us were just sitting around, but before we knew it, both of us were already fast asleep," I replied



calmly. Well... I hope I was calm.

"Hehhh... Well, isn't that nice?" she pouted.

"Are you jealous?" This exchange was practically our own skit at this point.

"Of course, I am~!" Kikyou answered strongly before forcing out a sigh. "Or at least, that's what I'd usually say..."

Kikyou heaved another sigh before facing me.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun. I think it's about time we stop this kind of skit. It's not something that friends would usually banter about unless they have feelings for each other. We're not in a rom-com manga, you know?"

I was initially surprised, but I guess this was Kikyou's way of working around her feelings. Her decision was to pull back. Well, if she wants to continue this performance, it'd be rude of me to not play along.

"That's fine with me," I shrugged.

"Right? First of all, I don't like you, romantically, so there's that. And of course, you don't really see me that way, do you?"

"No, not really."

"Umu, umu." Kikyou nodded with pursed lips. "You're my best friend, so if you like someone, I should be the one who supports you. We can't go on flirting like this or it might spell trouble."

Kikyou wanted me at a certain distance to cater to the perspective of outsiders. If I look like I'm too close, it wouldn't be good, for obvious reasons.

"So? Do you like Hasebe-san?" Kikyou nudged me with a teasing expression.

"I don't see Haruka that way. You already know that."

"Things can change, you know~?! But, I see... Same as usual, huh?"

"Yeah... It'll probably stay like that for a while."

"Mn... I expected that."

This was the current state of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and Kushida Kikyou's relationship.

The subtleties of human interaction are still quite alien to me. I merely followed her lead despite the questions that popped up in my head. Why didn't we just talk about it properly instead of playing dumb? Is it another one of those unspoken rules of a conversation? Is it about Kikyou not wanting to explicitly admit her feelings? Am I just being overly self-conscious again? Those queries terrorized my brain, but I can put them behind me for now.

The two of us stood listlessly before finally getting separated by our classmates. As Kikyou's help was requested by the girls, mine was called upon by the guys. The fifth day of this week-long special



test was almost at its end.

Class B has been consistent with its living situation. Given our current progress, we might rank among the top during the final grading. But after tonight, things might change drastically-- for better... or worse.

5th Day, 2:12 AM.

"If I remember correctly, it should be somewhere around here..." I muttered while walking silently in the dark.

I solely relied on the moonlight and my well-adjusted eyes. The trip was long, but after exploring this area with Hirata and Airi, the first part of the journey was much faster than I expected.

After a few more minutes of walking, I finally caught a glimpse of his radiant campfire. I thought I'd only see one person, but talk about a pleasant surprise.

"That's just how it is. Consider it a gift."

"Heh... I'll take it. It's not in my place to refuse, right?"

I tried to approach their location as stealthily as I can, but...

*\*Snap\**

A number of small twigs were laid down on the ground and inevitably, I stepped on one of them. This was definitely placed by him. It was an especially effective way to catch intruders off-guard in the dark.

"Kukuku... It seems like my second guest has finally arrived. Welcome to my humble abode, Ayanokouji."

With a sinister smile, Ryuen Kakeru received me without any hint of surprise.

"Oh... So Katsuragi wasn't lying, after all. It seems like Class B really *was* Ayanokouji's handiwork. Color me impressed... and deceived."

Beside him was a Class A student that I've heard of before. A lot of the girls have mentioned his name in the past.

Hashimoto Masayoshi, huh?

"Seems like you had some business with Class A, Ryuen. Care to fill me in?" I asked.

With my arrival, a conference between three classes had begun.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 12.2 - Exquisite Performance

The three of us sat around the campfire at equal distances away from each other. I instantly noticed Ryuuen's ragged appearance. Apart from his bag, some raw fish, and fruits, Ryuuen didn't have any other provisions. Even his shelter was a purchasable smaller tent. If he used the bigger, free tent, Ichinose and I would've found it suspicious when we visited the beach.

"So, what brings you here, Ayanokouji?" asked Ryuuen.

"I thought you knew I was coming. You didn't seem surprised at all."

"Kuku... Did my demeanor make it seem like that was the case? Do you really think I'd voluntarily make my presence known to anyone on this island? Staying hidden was the lifeline of my strategy." He grinned at me with a venomous glare.

"Well, Hashimoto's here," I replied.

"He's here for a different business and it's none of your concern."

"Oh, don't be like that, Ryuuen. Ayanokouji made the effort of walking all the way here. Wouldn't it be distasteful if we leave him out?"

"Heh. You're planning to help Class B, too?"

"Haha, well, not really. Originally, my plan was to help Class B instead of your class, but our princess said something spooky. I changed gears to fit the road as a result." Hashimoto glanced at me with a dubious look on his face.

"Oh? This is the first time I'm hearing that. What did Sakayanagi say?" asked Ryuuen.

"You don't have to concern yourself with that, Ryuuen. Just be grateful for my gift."

I see. So Hashimoto is one of Sakayanagi's aides.

"By *'gift'*, I imagine you're talking about Class A's leader? You told Ryuuen about his or her identity, am I right?"

"And why would you say that, Ayanokouji?"

"It's simple. Since Sakayanagi is absent, you'd want to sabotage the class while it's under Katsuragi's leadership. His integrity and influence would plummet as a result," I heaved a sigh. "I knew there was some sort of internal conflict going on within Class A, but I



sure didn't expect this. Who knew that you'd put the entire class at risk just to trip Katsuragi up."

"That's just how she does things." Hashimoto shrugged indifferently.

Since it sounds like my conclusion was correct, I'll leave things at that for now.

"Alright, I'll assume that Hashimoto has no intention of telling Katsuragi about this meeting. After all, it'd spell the end of Class D's strategy." I glanced at Ryuen.

Hashimoto did nothing but smile. He raised an eyebrow, waiting for Ryuen's response. It seems like he's decided to watch us instead.

"Keh... How the hell did you even find me, Ayanokouji? This place should be far enough from your base camp."

"That's your mistake, Ryuen. I have the means to find where your camp is." I fixed my sitting position before continuing. "You never really wanted to play the game using the usual conventions. Your goal was to come out on top using the additional rules. Am I correct?"

"You're saying some funny things, aren't you? Stop trying to scare me, Ayanokouji. You're not even sure if I'm the leader." Ryuen scornfully scoffed at me.

"It's true that the leader can stay on the ship so there's always a possibility that you're not Class D's leader. However, there's a surefire way to find out the truth."

Ryuen's eyes narrowed and his smile dimmed.

"The spots, huh?"

"I've known about your location since last night. There's only one reason why I didn't snoop around this area during the day. I wanted to make sure that you're unaware of me being on you."

Say, I carelessly try to explore this area and look for spots occupied by Class D. If, by any chance, I fail to find the spot and Ryuen finds out about me, then he'd simply abandon the spot in this area and change the location of his base camp.

However, I now know about Ryuen's existence on the island. It doesn't matter whether he scurries out of here or abandons the spot.

His only escape was to transfer his leadership to someone else, but while the rule allows the leader to retire and stay as a leader, he or she cannot transfer his or her leadership to a student who's already retired. Ryuen should know that already since it was one of the things mentioned in the manual.

"Oh boy, looks like someone's in trouble. If Ayanokouji finds a spot with your class's name on it, you'd be proven as the leader, Ryuen." Hashimoto commented with a grin.



"Kukuku... Seems like it."

Ryuuen seems unperturbed given how cornered he is.

"Before I go, is it alright if I ask you a few questions?" I asked, looking at the stack of multi-colored berries near Ryuuen's tent. A lot of them aren't native to this island, which further strengthens the fact that a large portion of plant life in this place is artificially cultivated.

"Sure, consider it a reward for figuring out my plan." Ryuuen opened his arms with a wide shrug. He must be in a really good mood.

"Can I have some of those berries?" I pointed towards the red, round berries piled up on the right side of the stack.

"You sure? Those are buffaloberries, you know? They're bitter unless you cook 'em." Ryuuen asked with a smirk.

"They look pretty tasty, though. Just give me some of the sweet ones then."

Ryuuen grabbed a couple of mulberries and threw them at me.

"Thanks," I said before munching on them. "Well then, Ryuuen, can you tell me how you initially planned to win this?"

"Do you have shit for brains, Ayanokouji? I'll get the names of each class's leader, of course."

With his plans crushed, Ryuuen decided to lay out his goals to me.

"That much is obvious. But how would you go about doing so? It's not like you have your goons to do the dirty work. They all retired while you had to stay hidden."

"They've done more than enough during the second day. Remember when I had Komiya and Kondou scout out your place? I ordered Ishizaki and Yamawaki to do the same with Class C. Knowing that your main spots are the river and well, all I had to do was sneak a peak on whoever reinvokes their right of exclusive possession. I planned to do the same with Class A, but as you've guessed, Hashimoto already told me about their leader." Ryuuen explained before glaring at me with a chuckle. "Of course, my entire plan for Class B has been ruined. You can probably finish me off entirely if you tell Ichinose about this."

It's not a bad plan if you're confident with your stealth abilities. It was something that would definitely work against opponents who aren't keeping their guards up. Class D's retirement, our alliance with Class C, and Class A's *'To Each Their Own'* strategy... Those three factors will inevitably make our security lax because we wouldn't expect anyone to spy on us. Everything was catered to push Ryuuen's plan into fruition.

"You just had to ruin the fun, didn't you, Ayanokouji? I've already



given you my explanation. So it's your turn to give me some answers. Why don't you tell me how you found this place?"

"Our leader told me."

"Yeah, no shit. Who cares if it's you or your leader who found me. What I'm asking is *how* you found me." Ryuuken leered at me with a soft snicker.

"The one who found you were on the high ground last night. That's how your campfire was spotted."

Around 1:35 AM last night, which was technically already the fifth day, I immediately noticed a light source amidst the darkness covering the entire island. It was very easy to spot given my position at the top of the hill. As long as I don't say anything specific, I can give Ryuuken the satisfaction of knowing how he "*lost*".

"Ooh, aren't you guys adventurous? You seriously scaled those mountains? It's no wonder Ryuuken's place got busted." Hashimoto, who looked like he was having the time of his life while listening, spoke once again.

Of course, I wasn't obliged to answer him so I chose to stay silent before giving a brief comment.

"I have to admit, we kinda got lucky on that one."

"That has to suck, doesn't it, Ryuuken?" Hashimoto teased Ryuuken with a scoff.

"I see. So it didn't matter how far my base was or how small my campfire was..." Ryuuken leaned back with a self-deprecating laugh.

All this time, his composure didn't crack even once.

"It's checkmate, Ryuuken. You might get 50 points by guessing Class A's leader, but you'd lose them all, anyway. Once I find your spot somewhere around this marshland, I'll be able to confirm whether you're really Class D's leader or not." I ate the last piece of mulberry before facing him again. "We'll tighten up our defenses around the camp. I'll make sure that you'll never guess who our leader is... And if I feel like it, I might just give Ichinose some advice."

I stood up and prepared to leave. However, as soon as I turned around, I felt a small shift in the wind's direction. Dashing up to me with speed, Ryuuken released a sharp roundhouse kick.

*\*Smack\**

I managed to turn around and block his strike at the expense of getting kicked off the ground.

"Nice reaction, Ayanokouji. That was a sloppy block, though." Ryuuken cracked his neck from side to side as he approached me.

"That was dangerous, Ryuuken. Are you seriously gonna do this?"

"Well, you crushed my plan. Do you really think I'd let you get away without a few scratches?"



"It didn't look like you were just settling for scratches, though." Hashimoto leaned back, trying to enjoy the show.

"I'm a pretty good runner. You won't be able to catch me."

"Not if I can stop that leg of yours from moving."

Ryuuen didn't really display any sort of martial arts expertise, but the way he moved displayed his experience with brawls.

He tried to kick me in the stomach with an added momentum from his running speed. I barely dodged to the side before tripping over and getting on all fours.

"C'mon, Ayanokouji. What are you doing on the ground? Are you a fucking dog or something?"

With a sadistic smile, Ryuuen tried to stomp on my back. I rolled to the left and dodged his strike, but Ryuuen was ready with another kick. I avoided sustaining damage by blocking it with my hands, but I got thrown off to the side once again.

"Oi oi, are you alright, Ayanokouji? Do you need some help?" The relaxed Hashimoto asked me with a smile.

"I'm alright." I slowly stood up and dusted my clothes. Oh... It got stained by the soil, unfortunately.

"The hell? Why don't you fight back, Ayanokouji?"

"We're in the middle of an exam. And even if I fight back, I can't risk losing."

This guy wasn't afraid of breaking the rules. The penalty for his actions is costly, to say the least, but he doesn't even hesitate with his blows.

"Hoh? So you think you have a chance of winning? Interesting... But too bad, I won't let you run away!"

Ryuuen sprinted at me with even more speed. He punched me as soon as he got close but I dodged it after springing my body to the left.

"Not again, you sneaky bastard!"

With a sinister grin, Ryuuen predicted my movements and successfully kicked me in the stomach.

"Agh-!"

"Heh. I wonder who's on checkmate now?"

I held my abdomen with a cough.

"It doesn't matter even if you beat me up right here. Class B will still win."

At that moment, I finally got what I want...

"Oh, don't worry about it, Ayanokouji. I won't destroy that face of yours, yet. I just wanted to you have a taste of fear."

Fear, huh?

"Alright, it's getting quite late, so I'm afraid I'll have to go. Ah~, what a shame. I wanted to watch your glorious duel 'til the end,



too."

Hashimoto got up and started walking away.

"You might want to drop your leader's name right now, Hashimoto. You don't want Katsuragi to know about all of this, right?" I said while struggling to get up.

Hashimoto turned around and shrugged with a sigh.

"I was hoping you'd be dumb enough to not ask that, but in the end, I guess it can't be helped."

Ryuuen jeered at us while shaking his head.

"Our leader is Totsuka Yahiko. Whether you believe me or not is your own problem."

"You can help me confirm that claim tomorrow. If you want Sakayanagi's faction to come out on top, then you'd cooperate."

"How troublesome, but I guess that's fair. It's just another 50 points, anyway. We'd best be careful, though. The rest of the Sakayanagi faction are in the dark about this."

Hashimoto's figure slowly disappeared. It was now just Ryuuen and me who's left at the scene.

"I'll be going on ahead, too, Ryuuen."

"You're body's pretty tough, Ayanokouji. I'm surprised you're not out cold after that kick." chuckled Ryuuen.

"I braced myself at the right time, that's all."

"I'll only let you go after I see that poker face of yours start bursting in tears. You can run while pissing your pants by then." Ryuuen mocked me as he narrated the things he wanted to do.

He bolted towards me once more, but I'm already done with my business here. I want to take a nap already.

Ryuuen tried to grab my clothes, but I jumped to the side and avoided him. He predicted my movements once again but unlike earlier, I managed to grab Ryuuen by the wrist and push him away by deflecting his weight against himself.

"What the-?"

I ran out of the area as he staggered to his feet. I didn't bother to look back and see Ryuuen's reaction, but I'm guessing that he glared daggers at me.

After a certain distance, I finally used the flashlight to help with my navigation.

Some time passed before I finally stumbled upon an unnaturally placed boulder, similar to the one near our river.

"The hilltop, river, and marsh's devices were placed on boulders while the hut and oak tree's devices were placed on plaques. Other than efficiency purposes, it didn't seem like I needed to think too deeply about the devices in general..." I muttered.

Meanwhile, the devices on the tower and tunnel were attached to



their respective walls.

That aside, this spot was occupied by Class D, as expected. Ryuen's leadership was all but guaranteed.

Finally, it was time to head back. When I reached the campsite, I saw Ike walking out of one of the boys' tents.

"O-Oh... Who...? Ayanokouji...? 'Sup, dude..." greeted the drowsy Ike.

He must be heading out to pee. I handed him the flashlight and got inside the other tent. Akito, Ken, and the other guys were fast asleep. I slipped through the tiny gap in the corner and laid down my body... It was already 3:45 AM.

"Seriously... That's was one hell of a farce."



## Vol. 3: Chapter 13.1 - Let the Show Begin

6th Day, 10:48 AM.

After getting back to the base camp, I approached Horikita for a not-so-brief conversation.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you've arrived later than usual. Did anything happen on the way?" she asked, sensing that something was up.

"I had some business with Class A. Specifically, Sakayanagi's faction."

Without batting an eye, I instantly went straight to the point.

The five of us; Horikita, Hirata, Karuizawa, Kikyou, and I were all aware of Class A's affairs-- albeit without the specifics. That's why she immediately knew what I was talking about.

With a serious expression, Horikita pulled me towards the edge of the campsite.

"What kind of business?" she asked.

"They sold their leader's name to me. Well, more like *'presented'* in that regard. I didn't really give them anything in return."

Horikita's eyes momentarily widened in surprise.

"Any chance that it's a trap?"

"The reason why I was out for so long was to confirm whether it was true or not, so no, it's not a trap."

"I see. I doubt such a simple trick would work on you, anyway." Horikita muttered before facing me. "So now... we have Class A's leader on our hands, right?"

"Exactly," I replied simply.

It all happened in that old tower. As a perniciously placed spot, it wasn't really included in their usual rotation. Occupying that place had a very irregular and unpredictable schedule. In other words, it was the perfect spot to prove Hashimoto's claim.

He obviously needed the help of a few other students, but I have to admit, Hashimoto's charisma and social skills were easily among the top. I managed to distract Katsuragi with Hirata's help. With the ruse of *"exchanging resources"*, their leader was successfully distracted. Of course, Hirata didn't know my other agenda, so Katsuragi would gain nothing even with some cold reading. After evading their cautious leader, he effectively manipulated his other classmates for me.

He created the perfect scenario that allowed me to witness



Totsuka in the process, and I finally confirmed that he was indeed telling the truth.

"That's... incredible news. Are you planning to tell Hirata-kun and the others?"

One would usually be restless and excited about this, but Horikita stayed calm and collected. I guess choosing Horikita to take on the role of an accomplice was the right call.

"No... I can't involve the others just yet." I shook my head in response. "That said, I have more things to tell you."

And that's when I proceeded to reveal everything to her.

"All of this... I... don't even have the words to..."

"You can analyze how I did things after the exam ends. But for now, I want you to focus on your role."

"..."

Horikita and I proceeded to ask Chabashira-sensei for some clarifications involving the additional rules.

Guessing the leaders' names was a huge gamble. If your answers are right, you'll earn 50 points for each correct name. However, having your class leader exposed would negate all of the provisional points you've earned from spots on top of a 50-point penalty for each class that has guessed correctly.

On a coupled note, guessing the leader's name wrongly would result in the same penalty. The guesser's class would have their provisional points taken away and suffer the 50-point penalty, as well. However, the class that managed to deceived them won't earn the lost points.

In other words, it wasn't just "*high-risk-high-return*"... it was "*all-or-nothing*".

"Do you really have to do *that*, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I already told you about my two alternative failed attempts. I'm basically left with no other choice now," I shrugged.

"Is that so...?" May it be as a classmate or as a friend, Horikita was worried about me.

"I'll be fine, Horikita," I reassured Horikita, patting her on the shoulders. "I trust you'll play your role well?"

"Yes, I won't let you down," she nodded with a determined expression.

At that moment, we noticed how the sky was slowly darkening.

"The rain might arrive faster than we expected," Horikita muttered while looking at the thick storm clouds forming on the southwest.

"Would you look at that? It's the perfect weather to execute



everything." It seems like Lady Luck is smiling at me-- if that's how the saying goes.

6th Day, 11:39 AM.

With the storm at our doorstep, we put in all of our effort to move the base camp right beside the rock tunnel. Using the potential risk of a landslide and river flood, Chabashira-sensei allowed the relocation.

After organizing our luggage inside the tents, we arranged our little facilities inside this pseudo-cave.

It wasn't long before the strong downpour wreaked havoc on the island. The students of Class B listlessly hung around, waiting for this storm to subside.

"Is everything alright, Ayanokouji-kun?"

As I watched the rain wash up the soil, Matsushita sat beside me with a curious look.

"Yeah, of course. How've you been?"

"Hmm, business as usual with Maya and Satsuki, I guess? You know the drill. We just do what we're supposed to do then do what we want to do, afterward." Matsushita shrugged with a sigh.

"Well, isn't that all of our classmates in general?"

"Ahaha, you're right! Although I certainly admire the ones who put in some extra effort like Kushida-san and her group. They've been a huge help to everyone. Hirata-kun's burden was significantly lessened."

"Yep, that sounds like them."

Matsushita chuckled as she drew closer to me.

"I know you have, like, an infinite amount of stamina, but take a break sometimes. You've been running around the island for so long, you know?"

"I appreciate the thought, but I'll be fine. This is the last full day of the test. After we endure a little more tomorrow, we can finally return to the cruise ship and relax."

"Mhm... It just dawned on me that this was originally a competition. I mean, it still is, but nothing really happened. Class A, B, and C just went on and had a normal camping trip."

"That's basically what happened," I smiled bitterly.

Conversations echoed everywhere. Mixed with the loud uneven noises of the rain, I felt calm, strangely enough.

"Do you think we did good on this exam, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I would like to think so. Everyone was diligent enough to contribute," I replied. "Of course, I can't strictly say that the contributions were equal, but it wasn't so bad that someone else was burdened by another student's negligence."



"Mn... After meeting the students in Class C, I figured that Class B still has a long way to go when it comes to unity. While I think it's normal to have some small arguments here and there, it's probably best if the class was peaceful for at least 90% of the time. Class C certainly has that cohesion."

It's inevitable for people to have differences in opinions. That's why they must strive to exhibit a certain amount of open-mindedness. Only then can cooperation be possible. Class B is a united class as a whole, but we haven't reached the monolithic level of unity that Ichinose's Class C possesses.

One good parallel was the amount of effort that they put into each work. Most students in our class just do the bare minimum, which was enough. But in Ichinose's class, everyone strives to go the extra mile.

"You're right. But I think we'll be fine. As long as everyone does their best to grow, we'll eventually catch up."

That's what I honestly think.

6th Day, 8:14 PM.

The evening arrived and Chabashira-sensei proceeded with the roll call. Horikita and I were currently talking about our journey earlier.

It was around 3:45 PM. Using our spare clothes, Horikita and I walked out of the shelter and traveled through the rain. Our classmates were naturally worried, but as long as we had each other's back, I don't think Horikita and I would be in danger.

I guided her towards the spots and adjusted the routes based on how the rain affected the pathways.

At 6:24 PM, the two of us returned, completely soaked. After showering with hot water, we changed back to our jerseys and proceeded with our day.

"Because of the change in our base camp's location, your original route became slightly inconvenient."

"You're right, but I don't think we can adjust the timing this late in the game."

"That's true. Well, it's not really a problem, all things considered."

Unlike my usual method of going solo, I decided to occupy the spots with Horikita this time. Her help will come in handy a bit later.

"We'll head out before midnight. As long as we're prepared, I doubt the plan would go haywire."

"I understand," she nodded.

The final phase of my plan is finally in motion. It's a shame that I didn't obtain that one final piece, or it would've been a completely



crushing victory for Class B. Now then, I think it's time for Horikita and me to put on a good show.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 13.2 - Possessing the Royal Cards

Last Day, 1:23 AM.

In the dead of night, Horikita and I trekked the muddy ground of the island. We talked about a lot of things along the way. I told her about some of the finer details involving the events around me and Kikyou.

"Sure, why not? Expel me if I do. It's not like I'm interested in her past, anyway."

"It's better if you don't ruin the painstaking effort I put in towards deflecting her hate away from you," I shrugged.

Of course, I only elaborated on the details that involved her.

"It seems like we made it," I said, checking the clock on my wristwatch.

"I think I'm more or less familiar with the way even if I were to go on my own."

"Yeah, and it doesn't really matter even if you arrive late. We'll only have one chance to reinvoke our rights after the morning roll call, anyway."

When the timer ran out, I immediately registered my key card onto the device.

"That should do it."

*And that was the last time I used the key card.*

Last Day, 2:17 AM.

Treading down the mountain, Horikita Suzune walked with staggering steps. She wasn't hurt, but the student supported by her shoulders was. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Class B's leader, leaned unconsciously on her body. Their clothes were covered in mud and blood. The blood came from the wound on Ayanokouji's head which was still bleeding.

There were three desirable locations where she could bring her injured classmate.

First was the rest area, which was all the way to the southern beach. Since the pier and ship were located here, they had everything they needed to give an injured person the aid they needed.



The second was Class B's base camp. Located near the rock tunnel on the northeastern side of the island, the two of them had to walk a long way on top of waking up their classmates to take action and help.

The third and final location that she was currently heading to was their class adviser, Chabashira Sae's special tent. It was the nearest place available to them, and with their limited stamina and precarious situation, it didn't seem like much of a hard choice.

"Chabashira-sensei, we need help, please!" I was prepared to wake her up in case she was asleep, but Ayanokouji-kun's prediction was on point. Chabashira-sensei was currently writing up some reports, possibly because the special test was nearing its end.

"Horikita...? Ayanokouji-?" Chabashira-sensei's eyes widened upon seeing our pitiful state.

She stopped whatever she was doing and supported Ayanokouji-kun with me. After arriving inside the inner parts of her tent, we gently placed his unconscious body on a neatly prepared one-person bed that was probably meant for her own use.

"I'll call in some medical personnel to come here ASAP. For now, I want you to tell me what happened," she said.

I proceeded to narrate what happened.

*We were traveling in the middle of the night to reinvoke our rights to some spots. However, as we walked towards a tall ridge, the edge suddenly collapsed and the two of us fell. The softened ground beneath us sunk and destroyed our balance. Ayanokouji-kun tried to protect me and his head hit a rock. He managed to stay awake for a short period of time before fainting.*

After noting everything down, Chabashira-sensei formally briefed me before asking a question.

"What do you want to do now?"

Of course, I had to go along with the plan.

"Please allow us to change leaders," I replied.

"I see... Ayanokouji's injury certainly permits that request. I assume he gave you his consent before passing out?"

"Yes."

Chabashira-sensei wrote something down before asking another question.

"Will he retire?"

"It depends on his medical diagnosis. If Ayanokouji-kun's injury isn't too serious, we agreed that he'll rest back at camp."

"Hmm... I recommend having him retire, but that's also perfectly reasonable. As long as Ayanokouji isn't in danger, saving up those 30 points would be the better decision." Chabashira-sensei calmly



listened with a nod. "You'll have to stay here and wait. If you want to call in one or two students from your class, we can assign a person to do the work."

The decision was entirely up to me. Is it even necessary? Should I call in someone? Kushida-san? Hirata-kun? Or maybe...

"If it's alright with them, please ask Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun to come."

"I understand."

Chabashira-sensei got out of the inner section and proceeded to work on everything.

Last Day, 2:41 AM.

I waited outside while drinking the hot chocolate that Sensei gave me. I somehow managed to wash myself using her shower room. A new set of jerseys was even prepared for me.

Ayanokouji-kun also got the treatment he needed. After a brisk bath and a clean change of clothes, he was questioned by Chabashira-sensei, along with the first-years' coordinator and Class A's adviser, Mashima-sensei.

Twenty or so minutes had passed before I finally saw some flashlights illuminating the woods. A school staff arrived with the two students that I called in.

"Horikita-san!" yelled Hasebe-san.

"Horikita-san, is everything alright?" asked Miyake-kun.

"Yes... I assume that you already know about the situation?"

"Yeah... Is Kiyotaka inside?"

Both of them had grim expressions. Their concern for him was very evident.

"Yes. Thankfully, Ayanokouji-kun didn't sustain any life-threatening injuries. His condition was mild enough for the medical personnel to allow questioning, as long as he's lying on the bed."

Miyake-kun and Hasebe-san heaved a sigh of relief.

Lights and seats were set up around Chabashira-sensei's tent. The three of us had to wait until we were allowed inside. The two of them asked me about the details of this incident. But for now, I can only tell them a brief version of the story.

"We were suddenly woken up by the school staff that brought us here. Hirata wanted to ask why Haruka and I were the ones that were specifically called out, but he was refused."

"The two of us were kept in the dark until enough distance was covered away from the base camp. We were really shocked after finding out that Kiyopon was involved in an accident, so I understand why the school wants to hide it from the others as of now."



"Yeah, the entire class might flip out and come forcefully."

With the amount of respect that Class B has for Ayanokouji-kun, I wouldn't be surprised if that were to be the case.

"I see..." I didn't want to say anything unnecessary, so I'll leave the rest of the talking to Ayanokouji-kun.

At that moment, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei walked out of the tent. The school staff and medical personnel were all gone at this point, so it was just the six of us left in this place. We were finally allowed to visit Ayanokouji-kun so we went inside and saw him lying on the bed.

"Kiyopon!" Hasebe-san ran up the moment she saw him.

"Kiyotaka, you... What the hell happened...?" Miyake-kun let out a big sigh of relief upon seeing Ayanokouji-kun.

The person in question was very surprised by their appearance. But after sighing in resignation, he calmly explained everything to them.

"I see... That's damn unlucky," said Miyake-kun.

"I'm surprised you didn't call Hirata," Ayanokouji-kun faced me with a curious expression.

Hirata-kun was also considered a leader of Class B. Apart from Ayanokouji-kun, he's probably the person that I've talked to the most. It would make sense for him to assume that.

"I wasn't really sure of it myself. I thought it'd be better for your closest friends to visit you instead."

"Well... At least you didn't call Airi and Ken," joked Miyake-kun.

"Y-Yeah... Those two would freak out for sure. Not in the same way, but they'd freak out, nonetheless..." Hasebe-san added with a bitter smile.

Ayanokouji-kun was permitted to stay, under the condition that he can't move out from the base camp until the end of the exam.

As things stand, his plan could already be considered a success. All I had to do was get the last 4 points and let history take its course.

Last Day, 8:29 AM.

Earlier in the morning, the four of us explained everything to the class as soon as we came back. After seeing me alive and well, my worried classmates calmed down eventually.

After the roll call, Horikita went on to take the spots with Makida, Onodera, Okitani, and Matsushita. Meanwhile, the rest of the class got ready to pack everything up.

Chabashira-sensei approached me for the final part of the exam--*the leader guessing*. Of course, I finally settled down after writing the names of the ones I knew about.



I felt like a retired old man, sitting around doing nothing. Whenever I tried to do something, either Kikyuu, Satou, or Airi would call me out and ask if I needed assistance. Well, it was only the three of them at first, but as time went on, other girls started to do the same...

They didn't have to, though. It's just a wound in the head.

The boys were a lost cause, too. They started muttering scary things like *"I want to smash my head in, as well."* or something along those lines.

Despite those, however, free time felt nice and relaxing.

It didn't take long until 11:30 AM arrived. It was the exact time when every class was expected to assemble on the southern beach.

Because I had a medical gauze attached to my wound, I stayed inconspicuous as to not gather unnecessary attention from other classes.

As expected, only Class A, B, and C had students occupying their area.

Well, their area stayed barren until a student walked out from the forest. Their appearance genuinely shocked each and every other student on the beach, my class included.

"Are you serious..."

"Huh...? But..."

"How...?"

A girl with a stern expression stood above Class D's designated area and joined us while waiting for the announcements. Even I didn't expect to see her face in this place.

"So it was you who stayed hidden until the end, Ibuki," I muttered before letting out a sigh.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 13.3 - Possessing the Ace Cards

6th Day, 2:48 AM.

"I'll only let you go after I see that poker face of yours start bursting in tears. You can run while pissing your pants by then." I mocked Ayanokouji while narrating the things I wanted to do.

He was one slippery son of a bitch, but his moves are predictable. This time, I'll make sure to land another clean hit.

I pounced at him, trying to grab his clothes. His dodging speed was fast but formulaic as usual. I reached out with my hands the moment he jumped to the left.

"What the-?"

Betraying my expectations, Ayanokouji grabbed my wrists and threw me to the side. I staggered badly and almost tripped over. I could only watch as Ayanokouji runs off to the distance.

"Kukuku... Interesting... Really interesting. Hahaha... Hahahaha!"

That guy was fucking around the entire time, huh? What a way to piss me off.

"Get your ass out here, Ibuki. I know you watched the entire thing."

"I only started watching when you kicked him in the gut, moron," she replied, moving away from her cover behind a tree. "That's the part where I got interested."

"Did you notice anything?" I asked.

She snorted hatefully.

"That guy knows how to fight, I can guarantee you that... But he was so good at playing dumb that I couldn't exactly gauge out his abilities... He's dangerous."

"Heh, I knew that already," I scoffed. "I'll just have to destroy him more thoroughly, then."

"With Albert and the others?"

"And with you, of course."

"Why the hell do you want to involve me again?" Ibuki asked with a very displeased expression.

"Don't kid yourself, Ibuki. I know you want to find out how strong he is..." I drew closer to her and smiled. "I know you want to see how *you'll* fare against him."



Ibuki clicked her tongue as she looked away. She sat by the campfire and munched on some berries.

"Leave the ones on the right. They're for me."

"I know. I wouldn't eat them even if you asked me to, anyway."

I sat across Ibuki and stretched my body.

"Ahh... Doesn't it feel good to have everything at the palm of your hands?" I asked, looking for a jolly conversation about the genius of my machinations.

"I know that you got what you want, but I don't have a grasp on what's really happening. Explain it to me so I can understand. I'm a vital part of your plan, remember?" Ibuki sighed in exasperation.

"Kukuku, I'm glad you asked," I replied. "Well, we've basically won, for the most part."

"Yeah, you've been saying that we won since last night, but how?"

"Our contract with Katsuragi was already the cream of the crop. Let's get that out of the way, first."

I've already explained how the contract works to Ibuki. Of course, I didn't bother telling her every detail, but at least she understood its value and how it'll benefit us in the future.

"Kaneda was under heavy pressure in that other class. He couldn't get any evidence in the end. Was that part of your plan, as well?"

"It doesn't matter as long as he got their leader's name. Katsuragi's main target was Class B, anyway. He must've been really happy with our gift for him."

"So you got every class's leader, right? Your main goal was to negate every provisional point from them if I remember correctly."

We were fortunate enough to find out Class C's leader before the fourth day. Even Kaneda admitted that he got lucky on the second day when Ichinose made him help Shiranami Chihiro and her group. He tried his hardest to get some proof, but Ichinose's class was too tightly knit.

Meanwhile, Class B made the mistake of completely ignoring Ibuki, even if they were suspicious of her. Apart from their leader's name, she also got a hold of the information about their point expenditure, props to that dumbass Hirata. Not only that. She also figured out Ayanokouji's rotation patterns by observing him repeatedly.

"What's with that creepy chuckle?" Ibuki asked, looking disgusted.

"I can't help but laugh, you know?" I faced Ibuki with a serious expression this time. "But you were being naive if you think everything's going to be that easy, Ibuki."

"Huh?" Her eyebrow rose in confusion.

"I confirmed it yesterday during our conversation... It was Ayanokouji. He was the true mastermind behind my loss back in



July."

"And so? What does that have to do with me?"

"Ayanokouji thinks like me. Do you really think you can outsmart someone like that?" I snickered.

"Stop kissing your own ass and just tell me already. You're pissing me off."

"I'm saying that he *knew* about you."

Ibuki's fuse cooled down in an instant.

"What... are you..."

"Do you really think he'd leave the key card inside his bag without taking you into account? Only dumbasses would fall for that, Ibuki."

When she told me everything about her inner workings with Class B, I immediately found that detail suspicious. I was expecting her camera to get found which would result in her getting questioned, so we prepared a story just for that. However, nothing happened at all. Naturally, I did some investigating. I found some interesting things that proved my hunch.

Ibuki turned speechless as she tried to wrap her head around my claim.

"Do you know why I asked you to tell me where you hid the radio? I wasn't interested in the hiding spot itself. My real goal was to snoop around the area. Of course, I managed to gather some nice clues. Class B students tend to leave marks on trees. And they left the same mark on the exact tree that you were sitting by," I shrugged. "It's a safe assumption that they went back to investigate the area like crazy."

It wasn't just that. Footprints were scattered all over the place and there were a lot of leftover marks of unnaturally dug-out holes.

I won't even be surprised if Ayanokouji figured everything out the moment he saw Ibuki's camera. There's no way someone like him wouldn't investigate her bag in advance.

"But... I didn't really notice any changes when I got back."

"Idiot. You think they'd let you have that luxury?"

"Then what the hell are we going to do?" Ibuki asked with an aloof expression, but I saw through that facade and felt the panic in her tone.

"Relax, Ibuki. That's what I told you before, right? We've basically won, for the most part. It sucks, but Class B will most likely change their leader before the exam ends."

"What reason do you think they will use?"

"Who knows? They'd probably stage an accident," I answered with a shrug.

"But the problem remains. If we can't figure out their new leader,



then Class B's provisional points will stay valid..." Ibuki pondered for a second before turning vigorously. "Wait! Ryuuen, you... Did you figure this out all way back on the fourth day?"

"Huh? Of course, I did." What a strange question.

"So you knew Ayanokouji's leadership wouldn't last, but you still showed the picture to Katsuragi?"

"Yeah, doesn't it feel great? Katsuragi thought he'd earn a bunch of points because of it. Hahahaha!" I laughed heartily, holding my stomach with both hands.

What a joke. He won't be able to complain, anyway. After all, I didn't do anything to breach our contract.

"That doesn't change the fact that Class B's leader will stay unknown. They'll be the ones who'll come out on top... and with an overwhelmingly large gap, too," she said.

"I already got that covered. That's the entire purpose of him finding this place and you being here." I opened my arms widely as I announced the ace in my pocket.

Ibuki listlessly stared at me with a muddled look.

"I can already hear the cogs turning inside your head. Why don't I help you out?" I stretched my body once again. "You told me about his schedule, right? Using some simple deduction, it was easy to predict that he'll be on top of that hill around 1:00 AM to 2:00 AM in the morning. That's why I made a campfire, both last night and tonight."

"You purposely lured him in."

"I was trying to hold back my laughter, you know? Ayanokouji was talking like he caught me off-guard. What a joke."

"So the reason I'm here... is to replace you as the leader, correct?"

"Basically, yeah." I leaned back with a grin. "I told you before, right? I have everything covered. Once Class B puts my name in, their hard work will go to shit. In the end, Ayanokouji's class would barely take the top spot. Meanwhile, Ichinose's class will take second place by playing house. It pisses me off, but they'll have their time in the future."

Class A's 270 points will drop to a mere 120. 100 points will be deducted from them after Class B and D put down Totsuka Yahiko's name. And course, another 50 points will be deducted after Katsuragi incorrectly guesses Class B's leader.

Class B's 143 points will not see any increase after Ayanokouji puts my name as the leader. Their 50-point bonus from correctly guessing Class A's leader will be canceled out by the 50-point deduction from incorrectly guessing ours. Of course, their provisional points will be nothing but dust.

Class C's 190 points will drop down to 140 because I know that



Shiranami Chihiro is their leader.

And finally, Class D will come out with 126 points for guessing Class A and C's leaders on top of the provisional points we'd gather by tomorrow morning.

1st: Class B - 143 points

2nd: Class C - 140 points

3rd: Class D - 126 points

4th: Class A - 120 points

I wanted to get those juicy 176 points while placing first, but Ayanokouji has mildly spoiled my plans yet again. However, I'm alright with just dodging a bullet. It would've been an atrocious result for Class D, otherwise.

"So everything went according to your plan in the end, huh?" Ibuki winced at me with a strange look. "Just how do you see these things...?"

She may hate my guts, but even the prideful Ibuki acknowledges my capabilities.

"Does it matter? I hate working hard, so using other things in my arsenal to destroy our opponents was necessary."

"So this doesn't count as *"working hard"*, huh?"

I could only smirk in response.

"Let's go, Ibuki. We'll have to find Sakagami-sensei so I can transfer my leadership to you." I said, grabbing one of the red round berries on the right side of the pile.

"Tch." Ibuki stood up and followed my lead.

Oh well, there will always be a next time. The feat of single-handedly disintegrating their hard-earned provisional points is enough to satisfy me for now. In fact, it's not really a stretch to say that I won. If I add the 200 points from my contract with Class A, then we've come out with a total of 326 points. What a wonderful landslide victory!

But of course, I won't nitpick like a lame loser. I'll be lenient and consider this a draw, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Next time, I will win alone.

*Author's Notes:*

*Class B's Point Expenditure:*

*Budget: 300 points*

*- 62 - Necessities*

*- 50 - Food Sets*



- 30 - *Kouenji's Retirement*

- 15 - *Water Shower*

*Total:*

- 157 *points spent*

- 143 *points left*



## Vol. 3: Chapter 13.4 - The Hand that Beat Four Aces

Last Day, 11:55 AM.

The rest area was filled with students. Each class's designated area had chairs and drinks so everyone felt comfortable while waiting underneath the provisional tents.

"What the hell...? Why's Ibuki here? I thought she retired long ago..." Ken scratched his head in confusion.

"Any idea, Kiyotaka?" asked Akito.

"No, I didn't know that Ibuki was still on the island." I shook my head in response.

Drones equipped with cameras could be seen flying around the beach. They're probably meant for the people on the boat who aren't able to personally hear the results-- namely; Class D.

"Ibuki-san! We didn't expect to see you here! All of us thought you retired!" Kikyou and her friends walked towards Ibuki and tried to make a conversation.

Since the exam has come to a close, Ibuki's job naturally ended with it. Outside of being a spy, she doesn't know how to act around the friendly girls that accompanied her throughout the first few days.

"Uh... Well, some things happened so..." Ibuki struggled to respond. She was overwhelmed by their genial spirits.

Around that time, Mashima-sensei appeared with a megaphone in hand. The air around the beach tightened as soon as he turned it on.

"Good noon, everyone. Over this past week, we, your teachers, have closely watched your efforts in this special test. There were some students who took on the challenge honestly and head-on. There were some who devised schemes to tackle the test with creativity. Many things have happened, but overall, the test results were splendid. Good work."

The students appeared relieved to receive such straightforward praise from Mashima-sensei. It seemed like everyone was finally starting to believe that the one-week exam was really over.

"Well then, to get straight to the point. I would like to announce the results of the special exam."



Not even Chabashira-sensei has seen the results. Silence enveloped the place while everyone appeared to be on edge. I glanced at Ibuki, whose eyes narrowed in anticipation.

"We will not accept any questions regarding the test results, no exceptions. We would like you to accept the results you have been given, analyze them, and use them to help you for the next special exam. It is what it is. Don't wet yourselves over these results. I implore you to accept reality as it is."

Mashima-sensei raised the card in his hand. This very card holds the fruits of our labor in this special exam. Once the results reach our ears, things may very well reach a turning point.

Inside a luxurious medical suite on the cruise ship lay Ryuen and his lackeys.

"Turn down the music volume, Ishizaki," he ordered with a grin. "Once they announce the rankings, I might consider changing it to a requiem, just to fit the mood."

Ishizaki hurriedly followed as Ryuen leaned back on his soft bed. The T.V. screen was so big that even Albert and the others could see everything clearly from the door. The inordinate jazz music that reverberated throughout the room slowly faded.

Ryuen looked forward to the reactions of everyone on the beach. He wanted to see how the three upper classes would take it--after finding out that their provisional points didn't amount to anything at all.

"Now, we will announce the rankings. The lowest class, in fourth place, is Class A, with 120 points."

A commotion instantly erupted.

"Hahahaha! Look at their faces! The confusion and disbelief--They're priceless!" Ryuen reveled without restraint.

"In third place; Class D, with 126 points."

The baffled faces of the students became even more apparent. At the same time, Ryuen's classmates gasped in awe after witnessing his predictions come true. They were skeptical when Ryuen declared that he'd have the class rise from zero points, but the results spoke for themselves.

"Y-You're amazing, Ryuen-san..." muttered Ishizaki.

Komiya, Kondou, and Yamawaki gulped nervously, and Albert nodded with a light snort.

"Heh, who do you think you're talking to?" he shrugged. "This wasn't even the ideal result, thanks to Ayanokouji."

"Coming in second place is Class C, with 140 points." Ryuen relaxingly tilted his head as Mashima-sensei announced the scores he predicted and calculated.

Ichinose and her classmates stopped being calm. This time, they



were also subjected to the same confusion as the other classes.

"And then, Class B..." Mashima-sensei's movements stiffened a little bit before he continued speaking. "Class B comes in first... with 247 points."

At that moment, the jazz music stopped.

Ryuuen's smile disappeared and his eyes narrowed with a sinister glint.

"He figured me out..." Ryuuen muttered under his breath.

It wasn't long before another smile was carved on his face.

"Kukuku... You never cease to amaze me, Ayanokouji."

Meanwhile, at the beach...

"We won! Let's go!" cried Ken.

"We did it!" Kikyou joyfully engaged with her friends.

"Yahoo!" Yamauchi celebrated with a jump.

"Our efforts paid off!" yelled Ike.

"W-Wait-- Isn't 247 points too many-?" Matsushita softly mused to herself.

Yukimura and Nishimura had the same doubtful expression as her.

Most students of Class B, especially the boys, roistered in glee. My classmates also praised me nonstop...

No, seriously. It made me slightly nauseous...

"You guys are amazing-- Ayanokouji, Hirata!" said Ike.

"You should be giving yourself some credit too, Ike," I deflected the compliment back to him.

"Ayanokouji-kun is right, Ike-kun. You're one of the reasons why we got this result." Hirata nodded with a warm smile.

I agree. But to be honest, it's probably more accurate to say that Ike was the sole reason for this victory.

"All I did was teach everyone how to fish and distinguish good food from bad food, though." Ike scratched his head, flustered.

"That's more than enough, Kanji-kun! Your knowledge helped us a lot!" Kikyou rallied behind our praise.

The attention got split between the three of us, as a result. Our classmates thanked and complimented us, boys and girls, alike. Both Ike and Hirata effortlessly received everyone's praise...

Just how do you do it, guys...?

"That's it for your very first special exam. I hope you think about your own ramifications so you can yield more promising results for the next tests. Enjoy your vacation." Mashima-sensei turned off the megaphone and walk towards the ship.

"What's the meaning of this, Katsuragi?!"

"Why the hell are we in fourth place?!"



"And why did we end up with 120 points?!"

Class A, our neighbor, seemed like they had something going on. Well, it was only natural. They were Class A-- the best among all classes in our year. It should've been very humiliating for them to place below Class D, which was considered as the class for defects.

"Ayanokouji-kun... Ibuki-san is approaching us." Horikita lightly whispered beside me.

"Let her. It would've been more interesting if Ryuuen came along, but he's not here," I shrugged.

Ibuki briskly walked towards us with a somber expression.

"How?" she asked me using a single word.

"I'm not obliged to tell you anything, Ibuki," I replied, shaking my head.

"Why didn't you put Ryuuen's name in?" Ibuki continued asking questions as if she didn't hear me.

"The exam's finished... I'm not in the mood to talk about this." I stood up and took my stuff.

Hirata and the rest of the class followed as soon as they saw me leave my seat.

Although displeased, Ibuki couldn't really force herself to continue. She could only watch as Class B departed for the cruise ship.

It's finally over, huh? This was a pretty interesting experience. I still have a lot of questions, but at least we finished the exam as the sole victors.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 14.1 - The Magician Reveals His Trick

Most of the students chose to arrange their luggage first before playing around on the ship. Of course, I was the same. Even though I only had a few stuff in hand, it's better to tidy things up before chilling.

As soon as we got our phones back, Class B immediately came into contact with each other. Hirata personally requested that he wanted to know what really happened in the exam. I was initially fine with explaining things to him, but then he said that the entire class would like to listen along.

Well... if I consider everything, I guess this is the ideal scenario. I'm friends with everyone in the class, so most of them are bound to ask me about what I did to achieve this result. It's better to give everyone an explanation at the same time.

It feels nice to say that I'm friends with everyone, but I don't think I can count Kouenji in there. We barely interacted and our hostile encounter on the island certainly weakens that thought. Thinking about it, though, I don't think he's the type of person who'd bear a grudge over something like that.

Around 1:00 PM in the afternoon, I exited the room and looked at the framed map of the ship. I absorbed the necessary information so I can navigate around with ease.

*10th Deck - The sun deck and rooftop. It has a pool, cafe, and gym among other facilities.*

*9th Deck - Karaoke, lounges, bars, izakayas, and some restaurants can be found on this deck. It also has a banquet area that's often referred to as an "Ocean-Viewing Buffet".*

*8th Deck - This deck houses the medical facilities along with pharmacies and drug stores.*

*7th Deck - Two big facilities can be found in this deck. One is a supermarket and the other is a library. Adjacent to the library are bookstores, a manga cafe, and a net cafe.*

*6th Deck - Spas, salons, and a lot of facilities related to relaxation and cosmetics could be found in this deck.*

*5th Deck - This is where the ship employees' rooms are located.*



*4th Deck - This deck houses the guest rooms for female students and school staff.*

*3rd Deck - On a similar note, this deck houses the guest rooms for male students and school staff.*

*2nd Deck - It felt very mysterious since this deck had vacant guest rooms that we have no way of knowing the purpose for. It was mostly deserted since almost no one walks through these areas.*

*1st Deck - It had the main lounge and the biggest banquet area.*

*1st Underground Level - It had the Movie Cinema that screened both new and old movies on a specific rotation.*

*2nd Underground Level - Students will be able to find the Live Theatre on this level where scheduled theatrical performances can be watched. The casino is also located here.*

*3rd Underground Level - Night clubs can be found here along with some more restaurants.*

*4th Underground Level - This had the breaker room where tons of switchboard facilities are located.*

Of course, I haven't really mentioned everything that could be found in each deck, but the others didn't really seem to matter that much, so I didn't bother memorizing their locations. Maybe in the future, if they become relevant, somehow.

And obviously, some facilities are off-limits for minors and students like us.

*(12:37) [I've made reservations for a lounge on the 9th Deck. It will be for Class B's personal use from 2:00 PM - 5:00 PM. This is just a self-organized class meeting and so it's nothing mandatory. Anyone who doesn't wish to join is free to do so.] (Hirata)*

*(12:38) [We'll come! We'll sooo come!]* (Karuizawa)

*(12:38) [Yep!]* (Rino)

*(12:43) [You got that!]* (Maezono)

*(12:43) [We'll be there as well!]* (Kushida)

*(12:45) [Count me in!]* (Ike)

"Ayanokouji-kun...?" A familiar voice called out to me as soon as I got off the elevator.

"Inogashira?"

"Are you headed somewhere?" she asked.

"Yeah... I have to get this checked." I replied, pointing at my wounded head.

"Ohh, right. If it's not inconvenient, is it alright if I accompany you then?"

"Sure. Truth be told, I'm really scared of doctors so your presence might help with my nerves."

"H-Heh, really?! You're scared of doctors?!" Inogashira gasped in



surprise.

"I'm just kidding. But they do have that kind of presence sometimes."

"Oh, you," she chuckled. "You're right, though. I was afraid of them when I was a little girl. I cower in fear whenever I see those white coats. I can't help but think of syringes."

"What were you doing here on the 8th deck?"

"Oh, I just bought some sanitary products for Mii-chan. She had it pretty rough on the island so these are for good measure. The other girls asked me to buy some items for them as well."

"I see... I remember Kikyuu mentioning something like that." I didn't really spend much time inside the base and my classmates didn't even bother making me help with the chores due to my role as the leader. I didn't know too much about the things that were happening in the camp.

"What are they doing right now?" I asked.

"Getting ready for later. They're hanging out in our room, currently. I lost the rock-paper-scissors so I'm the one who headed out. They'd fix my luggage for me in return, though."

The two of us started walking towards the clinic. When we got there, the check-up didn't really take long. The doctor said that my injury would heal in a few days. I just have to take it easy and change my bandage regularly. They also recommended some medicines like painkillers.

"It's good that your wound is healing up fast," said Inogashira.

"Yeah, I don't want this thing on my head for so long. It's pretty uncomfortable."

Inogashira and I rode the elevator while talking about the things that happened during the exam. When we reached the fourth deck, Inogashira finally addressed the elephant in the room (or hallway).

"I'm really glad, Ayanokouji-kun... that you're not avoiding me or anything," she faced me with her usual gentle smile. "To be honest, I felt really nervous after you rejected me. I thought we couldn't stay friends after that... But I knew you weren't that kind of person, so I'm glad that we could talk like this..."

"Of course. You're still my classmate and friend. That wouldn't just change."

Inogashira nodded happily. The two of us continued walking together until we finally reached the room that Kikyuu and the others were in.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun! Fancy seeing you here!" exclaimed Nishimura.

"You're with Kokoro-chan...? Well, isn't that something?" Onodera eyed Inogashira with a teasing smile.



"I-It's not like that, Kayano-chan! I just bumped into Ayanokouji-kun while buying our stuff."

"Ohh, is that what happened?"

"Yes! Right, Ayanokouji-kun?" Inogashira turned to me, looking for assistance.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"Now now, let's stop nagging them about the simple things. Why don't we just head on out and meet up with everyone on the 9th deck?" said Kikyou.

Thankfully, she was there to defuse the situation. Well, it wasn't like anything got heated in the first place.

The time was 1:45 when the six of us got there. In the group chat, Akito and the others said that they were already inside the room.

We met up with everyone and it didn't take too long until the entirety of Class B gathered inside the lounge-- well, everyone except Kouenji, of course.

"Did anyone find Kouenji-kun or know where he is?" asked Hirata.

"I think we saw him upstairs in the pool area," said Miyamoto.

That sounds like a place that Kouenji would enjoy.

"It's fine, Hirata. He's our roommate. I'll just explain it to him if he ever gets curious enough to ask me," I shrugged.

"Alright." Hirata nodded promptly before standing up to face our classmates. "Everyone, thank you for coming today. First of all, I would like you to congratulate yourselves for being very cooperative during the exam."

And the crowd goes wild. Most of us quietly clapped our hands while Ike and the others cheered with whistles.

"We've almost caught up with Class A. As long as we keep exerting this much effort in everything, I believe it's just a matter of time before we become Class A ourselves."

He's right. The class standings got updated after the special test where the points from our final exam in July were also added.

Class A: 1218 cl (1004 + 94 + 120)

Class B: 1112 cl (789 + 76 + 247)

Class C: 890 cl (663 + 87 + 140)

Class D: 691 cl (492 + 73 + 126)

"We're just 106 points away from Class A!" Karuizawa and her gal-friends celebrated.

"T-That's a lotta money!" Of course, the guys had their own priorities, especially Ike and his gang.

"We can go shopping in Keyaki Mall after we return!"

Nevermind. The girls were the same.

"All of us can enjoy the rewards throughout the duration of our



summer vacation. But right now, I believe everyone wants to receive some explanation from Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san. As we all know, only the two of them are aware of the true reason why we were up so many points." Hirata elaborated.

Well, we did mention that to everyone. Horikita agreed to help me explain.

"How exciting~! So, how did you two do it?"

"Tell us your master plan, Ayanokouji!"

I haven't really thought about the details that Horikita and I would leave out. I guess we'll just have to figure it out as we go.



## Vol. 3: Chapter 14.2 - The Hidden Joker Card

"Well, the reason why we scored so many points is simple. First, we managed to protect our leader's identity, which was Horikita. And second, I figured out that Class A's leader was Totsuka Yahiko."

My classmates nodded understandingly. It was a pretty straightforward and easy-to-grasp explanation.

"Then how did Class C only get 140 points? I thought they weren't spenders like Class D and they also had their own spots," asked Ike.

"Yes, and how did Class D manage to get so many points with everyone retiring apart from Ibuki-san?" added Matsushita.

"And most mysterious of all, how did Class A place fourth with such a low amount of points?" followed Professor.

I glanced at Horikita and left it all up to her. We've been friends for so long that I think she'll know what to say and not say.

Our classmates turned to her with looks of anticipation.

"First, I would like to address the issue with Class A. They scored so low due to two classes guessing their leader, which yielded 100 points worth of deduction. The ones who guessed their leader were Class B and Class D. The other 50-point deduction was caused by them incorrectly guessing one of the other classes' leaders. Of course, their provisional points were lost, too."

"Could you further explain why Class C is out of the picture, Horikita-san?" asked Hirata.

"Yes. But before that, I want you to understand that the other two classes lost all of their provisional points, unlike Class B and D. According to the data that Class C had provided us, their supposed final points would've been 190 points plus their provisional points from spots. However, one of the classes, Class D, guessed who their leader was. That's the reason why they lost 50 points, provisional points included."

"S-So we know that Class D has 0 points, right? If they guessed Class A and C's leaders, then that would be 100 points... and the remaining 26 points would be from their spots..." Mii-chan asked timidly.

"That's correct, Wang-san. We believe that's what happened,"



nodded Horikita.

"But Horikita-san, there's still one more mystery," said Matsushita.

If anyone were to ask that question, I thought it would be her or Nishimura. Apart from Horikita and Hirata, they were probably the sharpest critical thinkers in Class B.

"Yes, Matsushita-san?"

"If what you're saying is true, then wouldn't it mean that Class A still had 270 points by the end? They didn't spend a single point during the entire exam?" she asked.

Our classmates gasped after realizing what happened.

It was simply impossible for a class to not spend points for a week. It's just not feasible even under the best scenario. Since there were 40 students in the class, foraging food will never be enough without hogging many vegetation spots. Even Class B and C, who did their best in that regard, still had to buy the meal sets from time to time. Of course, sanitation facilities like the shower room and toilet were practically mandatory.

"Ayanokouji-kun, would you like to explain your deduction?" Horikita turned to me.

"Sure, I guess."

"You figured it out, Kiyotaka?" Ken asked in surprise.

"Shhh, Ken. It's Kiyoon. Of course, he figured it out." Haruka gestured for Ken to stay silent.

"O-Oh... I guess you're right."

Our classmates watched the exchange with bitter smiles.

Oh no, my mental state is slowly declining because of their high expectations. I might just want to step down from being the leader... again... and permanently.

"Matsushita, do you remember when we visited Class A's base camp?" I asked.

"Yeah..."

"Then, you would also remember that they had temporary toilets installed outside their cave, right?"

"Oh, you're right! They did have those... Wait, but if that's the case...-- Ah-!" Matsushita finally pieced the puzzles together.

"Whatever your conclusion is, it's probably right," I said, before facing everyone. "To put it simply, Class D spent all of their points very early on. If my understanding is correct, and with that in mind, they must've lent a certain amount of those points to Class A. That's the reason why they didn't need to spend anything in the exam while Class D's points got burned very quickly."

"Then what did Class D ask in exchange? Someone like Ryuen won't just do that without getting anything in return," asked Akito.

"You're right, Akito... However, the details of their deal aren't



something that I know of. We'd have to ask Ryuuen or Katsuragi personally if we wish to know," I shrugged.

"Wouldn't Class D just ask Class A to deliberately have their leader guessed?" mused Yamauchi.

"That would've been a reasonable deal if it weren't for the imbalance in profit. Not only that, when I scouted out Class A's territory, they had occupied at least three spots, and I'm sure they had way more. That in itself wouldn't make sense if they knew their provisional points will disappear in the end."

Sure, it might also be to prevent their neighbors, Class C, from obtaining more spots to monopolize, but protecting their leader should be the top priority due to the penalty.

Our classmates nodded to my explanation. After pondering my words and determining that everything made sense, all of them seemed satisfied.

"Great job, Ayanokouji! Class A got destroyed on this one!" said Miyamoto.

"You're right! Nothing less from you!"

"I'll take the credit for the final push, but everyone deserves the praise. Especially you, Hirata. Everything wouldn't have gone so smoothly if it weren't for you, Kikyou, and Karuizawa keeping everyone together."

If there's one thing that I've learned from Hirata and Kikyou, it was the act of accepting and returning compliments. It's one of the main reasons why the two of them are very well-liked. Well, I'm not really aiming to be well-liked, but it's better for everyone to have a nice impression of you rather than the opposite. It's a nice perk if I want to avoid trouble in the long run.

"That's right!"

"We all did great!"

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. I couldn't have done it without everyone's help." Hirata accepted the compliment with a smile.

Class B hung out until the reservation time ended. We watched a movie, talked with each other, enjoyed the food, and generally just relaxed. All of us had a great time inside the luxurious hang-out lounge and it seems like the entire class got closer to each other after everything that's happened.

I'm glad this wasn't a karaoke box, though. I'm really glad. Thank you, Hirata.

"Sorry for asking you to indulge in this request of ours, Ayanokouji-kun. You worked really hard to occupy those spots and you even got injured. I felt guilty after thinking about it. Maybe I should've let you rest first."

"It's no problem. I think this is better than just sending a crappy



message in the group chat. That's honestly more tiring than just telling everyone straight out," I shrugged. "It's also your way to have everyone rest together, right?"

I'm not really the type of person who wants to relax with other people around, but I think I've become familiar enough with my classmates to not consider them a drag. And I have to admit, relaxing in a suite like this is much better than lying dead inside our room.

"Goodbye, Ayanokouji-kun, Hirata-kun, and the rest of you!"

"We'll see you later, Karuizawa-san!"

"Bye-bye, Kikyou-chan! Horikita-san, too!"

Our classmates started taking their exits around 4:30 PM. It was decided that a few of us will stay and analyze the results in a more in-depth manner. Most of them wanted to take it easy in their rooms while the others decided to go all out and explore the ship some more.

"We'll be going ahead, Kiyopon~!" Haruka and the rest of the Ayanokouji Group stepped out as well.

It wasn't long until only a handful of people were left inside the lounge-- namely; Kikyou, Hirata, Horikita, Matsushita, Yukimura, Karuizawa, and me.

"So, what's the big idea, Ayanokouji?" Yukimura fixed his glasses upon asking.

"Ayanokouji-kun and I believe that all of you might want to hear the nitty-gritty details of what happened," replied Horikita.

"The details, huh? I see... But may I ask why I'm here?"

"That's a strange question, Yukimura. You're one of the academic cornerstones of Class B. It's not at all weird for you to be included in meetings like this," I said.

We have Horikita, who's the second-in-command behind me, Hirata, who's around the same position as her, Yukimura and Matsushita with their intellect and wits, Karuizawa, who's in charge of the girls, and Kikyou, with her massive social connections. Each and every one of them make up Class B's foundation.

Even if I were to disappear, our class will stay as a force to be reckoned with.

Horikita knew everything so she appeared calm, but the other three girls looked pretty nervous. Even Hirata couldn't fully assess the current situation.

"Well, I think it'll be fine as long as you guys listen carefully. I'm pretty sure you'll understand after I finish narrating everything that happened from the very start."



1st Day, 6:10 PM.

*I was naturally suspicious of Ibuki the moment I met her on the camp. I saw how dirt-filled her nails were, so I wanted to investigate the place where Hirata and his group initially found her.*

2nd Day, 4:30 AM.

*I woke up earlier than anyone else to check Ibuki's bag. My intuition didn't betray me since I actually found something suspicious, which was the camera. It would also strengthen my theory about Class D working with Class A because if Ibuki's only purpose was to identify our leader's identity, she wouldn't need to use the camera. If Ryuen couldn't trust Ibuki, he wouldn't have sent her in the first place. In other words, they needed evidence for someone else.*

2nd Day, 9:00 AM.

*We met up with Ryuen on the beach. Given his personality, I assumed that he had something in mind. My suspicions only grew when he said that another Class D student was sent off after getting "punished" by him. Of course, everything got confirmed the moment I saw the student, Kaneda Satoru, staying with Ichinose's Class C.*

*I also noticed something strange on Ryuen's table. However, since there wasn't technically anything there, I couldn't come up with a solid deduction. That is, unless, I investigate the root of my suspicion with Ibuki.*

2nd Day, 1:35 PM.

*After asking Hirata to scout out the southern parts of our current location, I immediately started investigating the area surrounding the tree where they first found Ibuki. I dug up the ground and discovered a walkie-talkie inside a zipper bag. This was the reason why Ibuki's nails were dirty. And Ryuen's own walkie-talkie was the box-like shape that I noticed in the table formed through water adhesion.*

*All of those things basically shed the light on his true plans.*

3rd Day, 6:45 AM.

*I was talking with Haruka when I noticed Ibuki eavesdropping on us. It was the only time where I didn't ask Kikyou or Karuizawa to distract her or occupy her time. After all, I wanted her to hear what I wanted to say. Of course, it's about the fact that I'm Class B's assigned leader.*

3rd Day, 1:15 PM.

*I joined everyone during swimming after asking Horikita to take a rest. I deliberately gave Ibuki the chance to rummage over my things so she can take a picture of my key card.*



4th Day, 3:45 PM.

*Since Class D has retired, I also got rid of Ibuki since she had no reason to stay in our camp any longer. Consequently, it would be hard to execute the rest of my plans if she's around.*

5th Day, 1:30 AM.

*I immediately noticed the light coming from the southern part of the island and deduced that it was where Ryuuen was camping out. At first, I really thought he made a mistake-- that he thought he'd be safe from exposure given that it's already past midnight. However, I immediately discarded such thoughts because I was aware that Ibuki knew about my rotation pattern. There was no way that she wouldn't tell Ryuuen about it.*

5th Day, 2:30 PM.

*"So you see, these are called 'muscadines'. They're like mini-mangosteens, appearance-wise. These are salmonberries. They kinda look mini-strawberries cuz' of their shape and color." Ike has been giving us a rundown of the edible berries we found today. "We've covered the rest in the past days. You remember them, right?"*

*"These are huckleberries, right?"*

*"Yep!"*

*"These are chokeberries!"*

*"Correct!"*

*"And these are buffaloberries!"*

*"Nice!"*

*Everyone proceeded to do their own thing but Ike said something that one would usually brush off as a friendly reminder.*

*"Ah, Ayanokouji, you were the one who found these buffaloberries, right?"*

*"Yeah, is there a problem?"*

*During this fifth day, I scouted out the central parts of the island and found these berries. I didn't want to push the southern area just yet, so I don't know if new types of berries could be found there.*

*"Well, I just thought I'd remind you since there are tons of nonnative and out-of-season plants around here. These buffaloberries are nice, but there's another type of berry that looks just like it." Ike grabbed a buffaloberry and emphasized its shape and color. "It's called a holly berry."*

*"Holly berry?"*

*I think I'm at least aware of its existence.*

*"Yep. Buffaloberries are edible, but holly berries are really poisonous. There's a chance that you might accidentally bring some in here, so I'll*



*tell you all the differences that I can remember."*

*The main differences are the bushes that they were attached to. Buffaloberries had rounded leaves while holly berries had pointed leaves. Buffaloberries are also found in bigger clumps than holly berries.*

*Those are very helpful, but how would I distinguish the berries themselves from one another? Fortunately, Ike told me about them. Buffaloberries appeared with a brighter red color than holly berries. He also said that while buffaloberries looked like very small tomatoes, holly berries looked similar to red candies. Other than those very subtle differences, the two are practically identical to each other.*

*After that, Ike continued giving me trivia about poisonous berries that I might want to look out for. Some of them were ivy berries, pokeweed berries, and junipers, among many others. He was quite knowledgeable about them.*

*Those were the information I didn't know I needed at that time. It was an unexpected joker card hidden within my deck.*

*6th Day, 2:15 AM.*

*I finally got to be face-to-face with Ryuuen. Surprisingly, Hashimoto from Sakayanagi's faction was also there. In the end, we got the name of Class A's leader from him so Katsuragi's reputation inside the class suffers.*

*The entire conversation was nothing but a farce. We both knew what the other person was thinking. However, Ryuuen didn't know that I was also aware of his bait. His real goal was to make me think that putting his name as Class D's leader was a winning move.*

*Of course, I was only suspicious at first, but two pieces of evidence made me confirm that I was lured to his camp.*

*I became a hundred percent sure that Ryuuen wanted to change leaders after seeing the berries on his food stash. He carefully and meticulously mixed the buffaloberries with a few holly berries. Apparently, some of them could be found in the southern parts of the island, where Ryuuen had stayed. If it wasn't for Ike's advice, I might've just fallen for Ryuuen's trap.*

*I tried to cause a commotion by letting Ryuuen throw a few punches at me. My goal was to find out who the other person was. But in the end, I barely managed to detect the presence of the person behind a tree. I didn't know that it was Ibuki at that time. Her identity was the last piece that I missed.*

*Everyone's eyes trembled while listening.*

*"You've seen through everything... right from the start...?" said Karuizawa.*

*"This is ridiculous... Ayanokouji..." Even Yukimura couldn't keep*



his calm.

Hirata stared at me with conflicting looks.

"I'm sorry, Hirata. I know I chose to hide many things from you, so I can totally understand if you stop trusting me completely after this."

"It's true that you kind of deceived me and some of our classmates, but I couldn't care less about that." Hirata looked up and gave me a sharp look. "Beyond all of this, your goal was to preserve all of our provisional points, right?"

Horikita looked down and bit her lip. At the same time, Matsushita looked at me with a worried gasp.

"That's right..."

"Don't tell me..." Matsushita muttered under her breath.

"But Ryuen-kun used Ibuki-san to find out your identity. You baited her into knowing about you, so you can sabotage Ryuen-kun's guess on the last day," said Hirata.

"It was your plan to retire from the start..." added Yukimura.

"Kiyotaka-kun... Did you... intentionally hurt yourself...?" Kikyou asked nervously.

"If you did, then it's something that I'm not alright with. If getting hurt is what it takes for us to win, then I'm fine with losing. Please never do that again." Hirata humbly bowed his head.

I didn't really want to tell them about that, but I guess it's inevitable. Hirata was a genuinely good guy and I appreciate his concern for me. I can only apologize in return.

"I'm sorry, Hirata. I'll try my best to find other ways next time." I lowered my head as a response.

They listened to my apology in silence.

"I'm also sorry... Ayanokouji-kun told me about his plan, but even though I was against his self-harming methods, I couldn't think of any other alternatives..." Horikita slightly bowed her head beside me.

Like Ryuen, I also considered poisoning myself. However, even Ike didn't have any detailed knowledge about the harmful effects of poisonous plants, which made it too risky.

My first attempt in gaining an appropriate reason for a leader change was to catch a cold when I slept outside with Haruka. However, my immune system managed to prevent that from happening. My second and last attempt was to make Ryuen injure me, but his blows wouldn't be strong enough unless he seriously tried to hurt me. However, if I let him beat me up, he'll immediately catch on to what's happening.

In the end, the head injury method that I've come up with on the third day proved to be the most practical course of action.



"Everything was okay in the end, so you don't need to keep apologizing. The class has been in its most united state after the exam, so let's just do our best in maintaining that." Hirata addressed us with a gentle smile.

"Yep! It's our summer vacation. We deserve to enjoy the rest of this luxurious liner before everything's too late!" Karuizawa lifted the atmosphere with ease.

"M-Mhm, Karuizawa-san's right." Kikyou agreed with her before facing me. "Kiyotaka-kun, hurting yourself isn't good just like Hirata-kun said earlier... Please don't do that again..."

She forced a smile after advising me.

"I didn't expect you to do something so reckless, Ayanokouji-kun..." Matsushita shook her head with a bitter smile.

"Say it again, Matsushita-san. Your plan was incredible, Ayanokouji, but I also think it's better to prioritize safety. What if things went wrong?"

"Yeah, you guys are right. It was really my bad."

At that moment, our little meeting ended on a pretty leveled note.

There were a bunch of layers involved in my plans during this special exam, so I'm curious as to what the school has in store for us for the next ones.

Last Day, 1:23 AM.

*As the two of us went down the dangerous paths along the hillside, Horikita grabbed me by the wrist, looking worried.*

*"Do you really have to do it, Ayanokouji-kun? Won't it be too dangerous?"*

*"I'll be fine, Horikita. In fact, it's not just the fastest, but it's also the safest way to go about the plan."*

*The genuinely concerned look on her face made me slightly happy. Horikita doesn't usually show these kinds of emotions. Her pride doesn't allow it. To be honest, I don't think Horikita is fully aware of how worried she looks on the outside.*

*"I'm counting on you, Horikita."*

*"I... I understand."*

*We walked along the forest and passed through a muddy ridge. This was the place where Horikita and I have agreed to execute the plan.*

*"Here we are..." she muttered.*

*"I know you've got the plan memorized down to the tee, but I'll summarize it again just to be sure." I turned away from Horikita and pointed out the key places she would need to note. "We'll collapse the wall of this ridge to make it seem like a small landslide occurred."*

*We jumped down and arrived near the tree below. I grabbed the rock*



that the two of us found during our first round trip. It was about the same size and shape as the one I observed by the river.

"Just like we planned, I'll smash this rock against my head." Horikita's eyebrows twitched as soon as I repeated that point. "Don't worry. Like I told you before, it would be serious enough to inflict a head trauma and a decent cut on my scalp, but mild enough to not cause a concussion or any long-term damage."

Horikita responded with silence so I continued breaking everything down. It wasn't long until the two of us acted like we really fell off the ridge.

*\*Splash\**

And just like that, mud was smothered all over our clothes. Marks of our bodies' weight could be seen on the ground, as well.

After that, we dug out and struck the soft partition of the ridge until it sagged and finally gave out.

"As the story goes, I managed to stay awake due to adrenaline rush, but after a while, I slowly lost my strength and consciousness," I explained. "We've already simulated the crashing motion, so you can leave the rock as-is. Since we landed near the tree, you can smear my blood on some roots if it helps prove the event."

I wouldn't go through all of this if staging an injury was easy. However, according to Chabashira-sensei, an investigation will still be held after the injured student has been attended to. It wasn't just to record the details of the incident. It was also to make sure that the accident really was an accident. It's especially suspicious since I am the class's assigned leader.

That's why we have to make sure that everything's in place. That passing storm was a real stroke of luck. Making up a convincing story wasn't too demanding because of it.

"Let's get this over with. I'm sure you want to wash up and change as soon as possible."

Horikita closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Mn," The look of reluctance disappeared from her eyes as she nodded in response.

"Excellent." I held the stone in my hand and faced the girl beside me. "I'm leaving everything in your hands, Horikita."

Using the right amount of force, the hard surface of that rock slammed against the right side of my head.



*Ike also mentioned the "cotoneaster"; another poisonous berry that resembles the holly berry and buffaloberry. However, this one has a more distinct shape.*

*This is the epilogue of Volume 3. Some Side Stories will follow before the start of Volume 4.*



## SS.12 - Summer Before Solace

August 7th, 5:45 PM.

Around the pool area...

"Good job on the exam, everyone. I sincerely commend you for your efforts." Kouenji flipped his hair before taking a sip of his drink. He arrogantly snorted with a smile.

"Kouenji, you bastard! You ditched us outta nowhere!" yelled Sudou.

"We could've bagged in 30 more points!" followed Yamauchi.

"Well, wasn't it unfortunate? I was of poor health, so there was no option left for me other than an untimely retirement."

"Poor health? Look at you and your damned speedo! I bet you've been lazing around in this ship while we were bustin' our asses on the island!" scolded Ike.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Kouenji continued laughing as if he heard nothing. "Well then, I shall head back and relax for today. You might want to go night swimming while the residue of my perfect body is still in the pool."

And with that, Kouenji boldly walked off the pool area while being followed by a bellhop.

"S-Sir, please don't walk inside the hallways like that!"

This poor bellhop had been warning him to dry off before treading the hallways.

"Hey, Kouenji, get back here!" Sudou angrily called out to him.

"A-At least give us some tips on the good places!" yelled Miyamoto, who had other priorities.

Most Class B students were also at the scene. They did nothing but smile bitterly while thinking; "It's Kouenji being Kouenji again...".

Sitting on a nearby table were Sakura, Hasebe, and Miyake.

"Look at Ken raging at Kouenji with the idiots," sighed Miyake.

"Oh, let him be, Miyacchi. He's one of them, after all." Hasebe chuckled with a side glance.

Sakura quietly listened as she took a sip of her drink.

"Well, idiots aside, where do you guys wanna go for dinner? We'll just tell Ken when he gets here and we can also invite Kiyotaka if he's down to go," asked Miyake.

"Ooh, I wanna go to that French restaurant! We really wanted to



try that, right, Airi?"

"Mn, it's quite fancy and the food looks delicious." Sakura answered while chewing the tapioca pearls. She looked like a little squirrel munching on acorns.

"Alright, let's go later then." Miyake nodded in agreement.

August 7th, 7:10 PM.

It seems like we'll meet around 8:00 PM for dinner... Well, I still got some time. Why don't I make my way to the 8th deck and check things out?

After asking the receptionist, I made my way to his room and knocked.

It didn't take two seconds before Yamada Albert opened the door for me. He stood guard while staring at me.

"It's fine. I'm just here for a visit," I said in English.

"Let him in, Albert. It's not a bad time for kings to have a chat." Ryuuen's voice echoed throughout the suite.

Albert gently opened the door all the way and stood back. I sat on the sofa that was near the main bed.

"How are you feeling, Ryuuen?"

"Keh, that's what I should be asking you. You smashed your damn head open."

"The risk on that is much easier to manipulate than actual self-poisoning. Two small pieces of those holly berries can easily kill you."

Ryuuen scoffed in amusement.

"So you really figured everything out. How the hell did you even notice it? I was careful enough to mix them up together."

"Well, I guess my acting wasn't for nothing. You totally thought I was stupid when it came to berries. I mean, I wasn't that knowledgeable without a friend's help, so I guess your assumption was fair."

"I failed to bait you into putting my name in, and now your class is right behind Class A. They certainly feel your presence on their backs."

"Do you want to stop now? You can't defeat me, Ryuuen. All I want is to get my class to the top. After that, I strive to live a peaceful high school life. It would be nice if you can just keep your warmongering away from me."

"We think alike, Ayanokouji. You have a grasp on my personality, as well as on how I think. You know that I won't stop until I destroy you myself. I may have interpreted the results of the exam as a draw, but our individual battle resulted in my defeat." Ryuuen replied with his usual smirk. "You've beaten me twice. I can admit



that. But we're just getting started."

I sighed.

"It was futile, huh...? To be honest, my goal was to ask you about your deal with Katsuragi. You lent them points, right?"

"Well, if you got this deep into figuring out my plan, I guess getting a whiff of that deal isn't too surprising. But you're kidding yourself if you think I'll tell you."

"I don't know how you see Class A, Ryuen. If you're allying with the Sakayanagi faction to collapse Katsuragi's faction, then do as you please. But remember, we also have a contract. If I choose to attack Class A myself, you'll have no choice but to cooperate."

"You don't have to keep reminding me. My memory isn't shit."

I stood up and walked towards the door. Ryuen's voice rang inside my ears as he spoke with a snicker.

"Remember, Ayanokouji... Even kings have weaknesses." That sinister smile never fails to make me ever so slightly narrow my eyes.

At that moment, I knew that I've succeeded in setting up the stage to completely crush Ryuen Kakeru.

August 7th, 11:30 PM.

I stared at the darkness while smelling the cold breeze. Around that time, footsteps could be heard coming from behind me.

We were at the ship's stern. The possibility of someone else roaming around this area was nil.

"Good job on the exam, Ayanokouji." Our homeroom teacher, Chabashira Sae, praised me with her usual tone. Despite that, I could feel the sincerity behind her words.

"It's nothing. This school has a really interesting program, so you can say that I had a fresh experience."

"Yeah, I don't know if you can find another high school that does things like this. Maybe in fiction."

I didn't turn around to look at her. I continued staring at the night view of the sea and the waters we're leaving behind as the ship propels itself forward.

"Is that everything that you wanted to tell me?" I asked.

"No." Chabashira-sensei leaned her arms on the railing as I did. She gazed through the black scene in front with a sigh. "You've put yourself forward. Did you change plans?"

"I see... That's a valid concern." I tilted my head a bit before replying. "I've decided to lead Class B from the front. After some thought, I've concluded that we can reach Class A the fastest if I do so. Besides, the circumstances are giving me all the chances I can get. It's better to take them now."



From the corner of my eye, I saw Chabashira-sensei nod.

"Alright. I've noted your words, Ayanokouji. Given your abilities, I don't know if you're feeling stressed or pressured about all this. But as your teacher, I want you to enjoy a fun summer vacation." Chabashira-sensei walked away with those parting words. "You should get back soon. It'll be bad if a ship staff or another teacher sees you."

I immediately heard her footsteps follow as if she knew I wouldn't bother giving a reply.

A fun summer vacation, huh? It's been quite tiring to pretend.

Captivated by nature? The view of the ocean felt really nice? Walking along the coastline was an amazing experience?

Those were all false and fabricated thoughts that I wanted... and *tried* to manifest...

I wasn't captivated by nature. I can feel the ambiance of natural landforms, but that's all there is to it.

I can see an aesthetically pleasing view of the ocean, but that's all there is to it.

They gave me new and refreshing experiences caused by the significant change in the environment. But apart from a spike in curiosity, I don't know what else I was supposed to feel.

I recalled my first experience of seeing the ocean... There wasn't any emotion behind it. I managed to express it with words of positivity, but none of them held true to what I really felt.

I wonder if it's futile... It might be, given the kind of life I was provided ever since I came to. However, giving up would be pointless while I'm here.

Maybe, at some point, I might be able to draw out other emotions that I wasn't able to before.



## SS.13 - Ayanokouji Kiyotaka Fans (4)

**Date:** August 7th.

**Group Chat Name:** A.K. Fans

Total Members: 23

Males: 0

Females: 23

**Class Distribution:**

A: 3

B: 15

C: 5

D: 0

**Names of Members:**

**Class A:**

- Osa7jimi (Admin) (*New*)
- Beer4U (*New*)
- Fr00tky (*New*)

**Class B:**

- 2M1I1 (Admin/Creator)
- A2S
- DeKai
- Sawako
- Memento
- Nika0
- Ui-tan
- T0ka
- Yuu-chan
- Kabe-don
- Shizu
- Doragon
- Haato
- Salmoon (*New*)
- Kuru0t0 (*New*)

**Class C:**

- BunBun (Admin) (*New*)
- Weivu1 (*New*)



- WhiteFlower (*New*)
- Dreamuu (*New*)
- 2B^mi (*New*)

## Chatrooms:

### 1st-Year Chatroom: (Around 9:00 PM)

[Welcome!!!]

[I never expected-- No, wait... Scratch that. I expected this.]

[It's Ayanokouji-kun, after all.] (2M1I1)

[The group grew significantly and it has a lot of chatrooms now!]

[I can't say I dislike it.] (DeKai)

[Wow!]

[So many!] (Nika0)

[Heya!]

[Thanks for making me Admin, 2M1I1-san!] (BunBun)

[No problem!]

[You were the first one to join, so I gave you the role.]

[I hope my decision to recede the Admin role isn't offensive in any way...] (Beer4U)

[It's fine, Beer4U-san.]

[Osa7jimi-san agreed to take on the role for you.] (2M1I1)

[I look forward to chatting with everyone.] (Osa7jimi)

[Having Class A and C girls is very exciting!]

[Hello to Fr00tky-san, too!] (Ui-tan)

[Hi, I'm pleased to meet everyone.] (Fr00tky)

[Hello, everyone!]

[Weivu1 from Class C here.]

[C'mon, other Class C girls, speak up.] (Weivu1)

[Hey.] (WhiteFlower)

[Hi everyone!] (2B^mi)

[Hello to everyone.]

[Nice to meet you.] (Dreamuu)

[I can't tell if they're lively or shy.] (Ui-tan)

[A mix of both, probably.]

[Ahaha!] (Weivu1)

[A mixed-class environment is new to everyone, so being a bit reserved is understandable.] (BunBun)

[I'm looking forward to what everyone wants to say!] (T0ka)

[Yes!]

[It's nice to meet you guys!] (Memento)

[Me too!] (Kabe-don)



[Same here!] (Doragon)

[Well, now that most of us are here, the new members might want to share their thoughts on Ayanokouji-kun.] (2M1I1)

[T0ka-san, Kabe-don-san, I know that the two of you have a lot to say, but give the newcomers a chance for now.] (A2S)

[Ahahaha!]

[Don't worry, I'll keep it cool.] (Kabe-don)

[Hey, why call me out?]

[My messages aren't as intense!] (T0ka)

[So you're admitting that they're also intense...] (Ui-tan)

[Uh...] (T0ka)

[Well, well.]

[Why don't we hear some answers?] (DeKai)

[I'm curious, too.] (Memento)

[Well, first and foremost, he's cool!] (BunBun)

[True!] (A2S)

[He's... handsome...] (2B^mi)

[Yep.]

[Lot's of girls are missing out.] (Doragon)

[Hmm...]

[He has a really phlegmatic temperament.] (Weivu1)

[Wow, big words!] (2M1I1)

[Wait, let me google what it means.] (Kabe-don)

[I think he's a wonderful person.] (Osa7jimi)

[He's athletic and smart. That's my impression of him.] (Beer4U)

[He's liked by a lot of people.] (WhiteFlower)

[Well, he's a good friend even though we're not classmates.]

[I admire him for that.] (Dreamuu)

[Ohh...]

[Well, he is quite close with many Class C students.] (2M1I1)

[He's an excellent student overall.] (Fr00tky)

[Ohh, I see, I see.] (T0ka)

[Mhm, understandable.] (Memento)

[Amazing answers, everyone!] (Ui-tan)

[You understand a lot about the study of Ayanocology.]

[I'm proud.] (Kabe-don)

[What...?] (Sawako)

[I'll take that subject in college! Just kidding!] (A2S)

[Lol.] (Memento)

[草] (Ui-tan)

[Lol.] (DeKai)

[草] (A2S)

[Well, I guess that's how everyone sees Ayanokouji-kun. We, of Class B, are practically the same.] (2M1I1)



[Ayanokouji-kun isn't the talkative type, yeah, but if you're in a conversation with each other, he really listens.]

[I like that a lot about him.] (Weivu1)

[That's true!]

[You can tell that Ayanokouji-kun pays attention when you're talking to him.] (Yuu-chan)

[He's surprisingly thoughtful, too.]

[It's not that noticeable because he tends to do things in a roundabout way, though.] (Nika0)

[Woah, that sounds like it came from someone who's in the deep end.]

[You're very close with him, aren't you, Nika-san?] (BunBun)

[Well...]

[Every Class B student is close to Ayanokouji-kun, so I think they might see that side of him, too.] (Nika0)

[How enviable. I wish we were in the same class.] (Osa7jimi)

[It sucks that just being in different classes also means that you're rivals.] (Sawako)

[Well, it's just my wishful thinking. Please don't mind it.] (Osa7jimi)

[Yeah.]

[Osa7jimi-san is already in Class A, anyway.]

[That's the ultimate goal of the students here, right?] (DeKai)

[We're in Class A now, but Class B might overtake us soon, you know?] (Osa7jimi)

[Ahaha, I mean, we believe in Ayanokouji-kun and the others' abilities, but we can't afford to underestimate you guys.]

[You're Class A for a reason.] (T0ka)

[Fufufu, why thank you for the praise.] (Osa7jimi)

[Well, class standings aside, the special exam was something else, wasn't it?] (Ui-tan)

[True!]

[It was a camping trip on hard mode.] (BunBun)

[I'm glad everyone pulled through.] (Weivu1)

[Yeah... Ayanokouji-kun got caught up in an accident, too.]

[It's a good thing that his injury wasn't too dangerous.] (Doragon)

[Oh my... Is he okay now?] (Osa7jimi)

[This is the first time I've heard of this.]

[I barely saw him earlier today.]

[I see... So he really was injured...] (Weivu1)

[We're worried out of our minds at first, but it's fine.]

[That guy's really tough.] (Kabe-don)

[Well, Ayanokouji-kun is highly athletic. It's a given that his body is tough.] (Dreamuu)



[Along with Hirata-kun and the others, he really worked hard for the class... He was one of the main reasons why Class B got the most points.] (Sawako)

[Oh, congrats on that, by the way!] (Weivu1)

[Yes, congratulations.]

[I don't particularly mind that Class A came in last this time, but the uproar still remains.] (Beer4U)

[Fufu... I guess Class B was led really well, this time.] (Osa7jimi)

[Yeah...]

[He was so cool...] (2M1I1)

[Right???

[I wish we could've hung out more on the island.] (Doragon)

[Yikes.]

[If the mood gets too good, I might just confess!] (A2S)

[Honestly, same...]

[Not that I can do that, anyway.] (Ui-tan)

[Why?]

[Are you seeing someone, Ui-san?] (Nika0)

[No, no!]

[I'm just scared since he'll probably reject me!] (Ui-tan)

[Ohh, I see.] (Nika0)

[I think most of us are like that.] (2M1I1)

[I wonder if anyone has confessed their feelings to him yet...]

(BunBun)

[Well, I want to, but it's too dangerous!] (Kabe-don)

[Why...? Isn't it more of an advantage even if you get rejected?]

(BunBun)

[Oh...]

[I see...] (Nika0)

[Well...]

[That makes sense but...] (Kabe-don)

[It's an appropriate strategy but...] (Ui-tan)

[I'm sorry...]

[I know we're all girls here, but I don't have a lot of experience with this stuff...]

[So can anyone explain what the "strategy" is...?] (Weivu1)

[It's not that deep, to be honest. If you confess your feelings to Ayanokouji-kun, there's a chance that he'll be conscious of you... You might get lucky on your second shot if that's the case...]

(BunBun)

[Ohh... I see...] (Weivu)

[I see...] (Yuu-chan)

[I see...] (Shizu)

[I see...] (2B^mi)



### **Class A Chatroom: (Around 10:00 PM)**

[There's only the three of us here.]  
[Do any of you feel lonely?] (Osa7jimi)  
[Not really.] (Beer4U)  
[Not really.] (Fr00tky)  
[Fufufu.]  
[I see, but wasn't talking with everyone quite fun?] (Osa7jimi)  
[They were fun, yes.] (Beer4U)  
[Mhm.] (Fr00tky)  
[That's a good start.]  
[Let's all admire Ayanokouji-kun together.] (Osa7jimi)

### **Class B Chatroom: (Around 10:00 PM)**

[We also have two new members from the class!]  
[Welcome!] (2M1I1)  
[Good evening.] (Kuru0t0)  
[Hey~!] (Salmoon)  
[Hello! You missed out on our conversations with the newcomers from other classes.]  
[It was fun!] (Ui-tan)  
[I barely managed to join...] (Shizu)  
[I didn't even get to type anything...]  
[I enjoyed reading, though.] (Haato)  
[So you were there, too, Haato-san.] (Sawako)  
[Be sure to join us when the chat gets active again!] (A2S)  
[Sure thing!] (Salmoon)  
[Yes...] (Kuru0t0)  
[So, you two got the hots for Ayanokouji-kun, as well?] (A2S)  
[Hmm... Well, I certainly admire him as the class's leader, but I only thought of him romantically until a couple of weeks ago.] (Salmoon)  
[Oh, interesting!]  
[You have a crush on someone else, Salmoon-san?] (T0ka)  
[I guess you could say that.]  
[But of course, that won't stop me from being Ayanokouji-kun's fan!] (Salmoon)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (DeKai)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (Sawako)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (Memento)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (Ui-tan)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (Doragon)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (Kabe-don)  
[🌸🌸🌸] (T0ka)



[🌸🌸🌸] (A2S)

[🌸🌸🌸] (Nika0)

[How about you, Kuru0t0-san?] (Memento)

[I don't think I see Ayanokouji-kun that way...]

[But I joined because I thought I'd know more about him.]  
(Kuru0t0)

[Woah, this is really interesting. We've got two new members who don't have a crush on him.] (T0ka)

[A super rare occurrence, indeed.] (Kabe-don)

[Well, I can't really say if you're in the right place, but the group's purpose is to talk about him, so you're very welcome.] (2M1I1)

[Yes.] (Kuru0t0)

[Welcome aboard!] (Ui-tan)

### **Class C Chatroom: (Around 10:00 PM)**

[This group got really big, huh?] (BunBun)

[I think it'll get bigger in the future, though...] (Weivu1)

[According to 2M1I1-san, we get to talk about Ayanokouji-kun, and knowing the members' real-life identity isn't needed.] (BunBun)

[Well, it's quite embarrassing if you think about it.]

[A lot of girls start fangirling without realizing it.] (Weivu1)

[That's true.]

[We have our own class group chat if we want to talk about other matters.] (WhiteFlower)

[But here, it'll be all about Ayanokouji-kun!] (Dreamuu)

[I'm sure more Class C girls will join in the future.] (2B^mi)

[True.] (Dreamuu)

### **Additional Group Chat Settings:**

- 1st-Year Chatroom: Public
- Class A Chatroom: Private
- Class B Chatroom: Private
- Class C Chatroom: Private

(Only users with Creator Privileges have access to all Private Chatrooms)

- Screenshots: Disabled
- Clear Cycle: Every 24 Hours, 6:00 AM

### **Membership Settings:**

- Male: Invite-only
- Female: Visible to all



## SS.14 - The Unknown Lady of the Past

August 8th, 6:30 AM.

It was time to enjoy my summer vacation.

We've been granted free access to this luxurious cruise ship. Wasting my time inside this four-person room would be the worst move to make. Although, to be honest, that's probably what I would do if I didn't have any friends.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun." I was met with Hirata Yousuke's early greeting.

This guy has been my friend since the start of school, even before Ken. He's saved my butt many times whenever I'm in a pinch (socially). Handsome, kind, smart-- he was every girl's dream. Well... That description pretty much describes me, too, according to a lot of my classmates. Kikyuu and my other female friends have been hammering that thought into me. They say that I'm too oblivious to my own popularity.

I can't help it, okay? I was born a loner. I can't be accustomed to that kind of attention easily.

"Good morning, Hirata," I replied.

Kouenji was up early and was nowhere to be found while the usual early bird that's Yukimura slept soundly on his bed. I wonder if this is how our wake-up order was going to be for the rest of the week?

"What do you plan to do, Ayanokouji-kun? The morning buffet will start at eight, but we were allowed to eat earlier if we wanted."

"I don't know, actually. I didn't really plan anything for myself."

"Ahh, you're right. Everyone just wanted to get some rest yesterday. There really wasn't any time to plan stuff."

"Well, our vacation will begin for real. I'm sure our classmates are very excited. I won't be surprised if most of them are already awake at this time, trying to figure out what they wanna do."

"Wanna hang out for a bit, then?"

"Sure."

After washing our faces, Hirata and I got on the elevator. Upon arriving on the 5th deck, the two of us headed towards the ship's bow. A few students from other classes were there, minding their own business.

"The ocean looks so amazing, doesn't it?" Hirata held the



starboard rails while basking in the gusty wind.

"The morning breeze feels nice. It's not too cold since the sun is starting to rise."

We looked at the bluish horizon, experiencing the vastness of the pacific ocean.

"How are you finding the class, Ayanokouji-kun?" Hirata asked, breaking the silence.

"I wonder what I'm supposed to say?" I shrugged. "Hmm, I think they're alright."

"Haha-- sounds like something that you would answer." Hirata chuckled before facing the ocean. "I've been thinking about it a lot... If you weren't there to save our class in April, I'm sure things wouldn't be the same as now."

"That's true. In the likely case that our classmates stayed ignorant for an entire month, our class points in May would've been significantly lower, if not nothing at all. We might still be in Class D right now if that were to be the case. It's the critical first month, too, for their academics."

Both of us chuckled bitterly while thinking about such a gruesome timeline.

"You know, when I got to this school, I was ready to lead the class if no one stepped up. Of course, I immediately knew that the role would suit you the most."

"I think you're fit for it, too. I can't do the same things that you do."

"That goes for most people since we're all different... But even if I can keep the class together, what we'd need are results. You're the only one who can give us that," he sighed. "Up until now, the reason why you got assigned to Class D is still a big mystery for me. Our classmates feel the same. But of course, they know that you don't like talking about your personal life, and we respect that."

"That's the same for you. You're an excellent student through and through, but you ended up in Class D. We're in the same boat. I'm sure our classmates are wondering about that, as well."

To be honest, I think a lot of it is due to the purpose of equalizing the power balance between classes. I'm pretty sure Horikita and I have talked about that before, although briefly. Excellent students are still placed in lower classes, and they may or may not have one or two glaring flaws. Horikita's initial lack of cooperativeness, Kouenji's indifference to the class, Yukimura's weak physique, and Mii-chan's lack of confidence are some examples.

Of course, enigmas like Matsushita and Nishimura are present. And speaking of Matsushita, we've known each other for so long, so apart from Kikyou, who knows the situation about my father, she's



probably the girl who knows me the most and the girl I know the most. Up until now, even after knowing Matsushita's family life and past educational achievements, her placement in Class D is still a mystery. The only explanation was my initial theory of power balancing.

Kikyō would've been the same as Matsushita and Nishimura, given her above-average overall abilities, but she was most likely assigned in Class D due to her past. Hirata can still fall into either category depending on his past.

"Do you want to know?" Hirata probed with a smirk.

"If you want to trade information, then I'd pass."

"Ahaha, I understand. It was worth the try, though."

"I hope none of you take it with an offense. The reason why I don't talk about myself too much is that I'd rather stay silent than lie to you guys."

"Yeah. If it's something that you want to keep hidden no matter what, then who are we to pry? But on the contrary, I want to talk about myself."

"Is that fine with you?"

"Of course. My past... isn't the most pleasant thing, but it might make you understand me more. Why do I want to save everyone? Why am I willing to go so far? What drives me? As your friend, I want you to know that. It doesn't matter if you don't tell me about yourself in return, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I see..."

"Now's not the time, though. I don't feel like opening up old wounds just yet."

"I'll wait... Thank you."

"Haha, you're very welcome."

Hirata Yousuke was a good guy. I'm sure that opinion won't change even if he tells me about his past. It might be tragic, it might be dark, but in the end, he's become the current guy that he is-- a kind and thoughtful classmate that's willing to help his friends without asking for anything in return.

August 8th, 9:10 AM.

I was on my way to the elevator when a familiar voice called out from behind me.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. Can we take your time for a sec'?"

It was Class A's Hashimoto Masayoshi... and if I remember correctly, Kamuro Masumi.

Hashimoto waved at me while Kamuro continued talking on the phone. Due to the lack of students on this deck, I could clearly hear what she was saying.



"That was stupid. Did you seriously have to type the actual thing instead of a typical 'haha'?" Her eyes narrowed while arguing with the person on the other end. "Hah? What do you mean by 'trademark' chuckle? Are you doxxing yourself?"

A fight? Well, it's sounded more like scolding a superior when they mess up rather than fighting with a friend, though.

"Is everything alright?" I asked.

"Ah... Haha... Don't mind them for now. I just wanted to congratulate you on your win during the exam. You really gave Class A and D a run for their money."

"It was nothing. You guys are still in the lead, you know?"

"Don't sell your achievements like that, man. You're the sole reason why Class D is the current Class B and a contender for toppling Class A off its throne. You wouldn't tell me that the class played a big part now, will you? Given how this school was structured, I'm sure most of them wouldn't have been able to keep up."

Like the ones on the student body's top brass, Hashimoto also knew how things worked. Of course, it's also possible that, like Ryuen and Katsuragi, Sakayanagi already figured out that I was behind Class D's rise in May.

"You're right, but I think they just need time to improve."

"Oh, of course. That's certainly the best way to look at it."

At that moment, Kamuro approached us and handed the phone to Hashimoto.

"Yes... Yes, of course. I'll put him on, now." Hashimoto pulled the phone away from his ear and gave them to me. "Our princess wants to talk to you. Is that alright?"

"Sure."

I see. On the other end of this call... was Class A's Sakayanagi Arisu. The leader of the other faction... and the chairman's daughter.

"Hello?"

*"Fufufu... I finally get to hear your voice, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun."* Pleasant sounds rang inside my ear. She had the voice and tone of a well-bred young lady.

"It's nice meeting you, Sakayanagi Arisu-san."

*"It would've been ideal to meet you personally, but this will have to do for now."*

"Do you have any business with me?"

*"Oh, that's an amusing question. Given how you're currently doing things, I thought you were the one who had some business with me,"* she chuckled.

Did the chairman tell her about our meeting? No... Given his



show of partiality, there's a very low chance for that to happen.

"Why do you say so?"

*"You just defeated Katsuragi-kun. I thought you were thinking about defeating me, next,"* she replied like it was a matter of fact.

It was clear that Sakayanagi Arisu was an intelligent person, but as of now, I can't fathom the limits of that intelligence.

"That's reasonable. However, I'm just planning to enjoy my summer vacation right now."

*"Yes, of course."* Her tone tells me that she was in a really good mood. *"Well, class conflict aside, I didn't really plan to make contact with you, Ayanokouji-kun-- at least, not this soon."*

"Then why did you?"

*"I heard that you got injured. Are you faring well?"*

Some Class A students might've seen me walking around the halls with a bandaged head. It shouldn't be too strange for her to know about this if I was a person of interest, being Class B's leader and all.

"I'm fine, thank you for asking. But it surprises me that you're concerned about my well-being when we haven't even met yet."

*"Fufufu. It's been four months since school started. I'm sure you've made a lot of close friends. However... I know more about you than any of them combined."*

Knowledge about the White Room was roughly equivalent to knowing my entire life. Sakayanagi was technically right, in that sense.

"We can talk about that in length once we return."

*"Oh? You don't sound surprised at all."*

And because she sounds surprised about my reaction, I can basically confirm that the chairman didn't tell her anything.

"Not really. Your father and I met once. He's told me about you."

*"I see..."* Sakayanagi continued after a brief pause. *"Thank you for being considerate enough to tell me about it."*

"Think of it as a show of my gratitude. Acting like you didn't know me was also an available option for you."

So this was Sakayanagi Arisu. If she wants to fight me head-on, then I'd gladly reciprocate.

*"Yes. Well then, it seems like I've taken too much of your time. Please enjoy your summer vacation, Ayanokouji-kun."*

"Same here."

*"I look forward to the day where we finally meet in person."*

I gave the phone back to Hashimoto, who had been chatting with Kamuro while Sakayanagi and I were talking. He took the call and nodded a few times before finally hanging up.

"So, how was it? What's your impression of Class A's true leader?"



he asked.

Kamuro calmly observed me with crossed arms.

"Hmm... I can't really say much right now, but I guess I can see why she doesn't get along well with Katsuragi."

He could've been sly with using her knowledge about me, but Sakayanagi chose to meet me head-on.

"Right? Katsuragi's pretty boring, isn't he?" Hashimoto laughed heartily before facing Kamuro. "It's about time we go. See you whenever, Ayanokouji."

Sakayanagi knows about me. On the other hand, I know nothing about her. After we meet in person, that's where I'll confirm her stance on my matters regarding the White Room.

Will she help me hide my past? Or will she use it against me?



## SS.15 - Poolside View

August 8th, 2:45 PM.

"Alright, it's your loss if you really don't want to." Akito shrugged as he walked away with Ken.

"You can always change your mind." Ken turned around with a wave.

"We'll be fine, Miyacchi. You guys can go have some fun," said Haruka.

"Mn... We've had our fill with swimming back on the island, so we'll be alright over here," added Airi.

After getting reassurance from the two of them, I followed the other two and got in the pool.

"Wooh, the water's so damn nice!"

"This weather is perfect!"

A lot of the students frolicked around the pool area with their friends. It was a healthy mix of different classes. Of course, I couldn't really swim like everyone due to my bandages. I just hovered around the poolside and hung out with some other Class B guys.

"You dating anyone yet, Ayanokouji?" asked Miyamoto.

"Yeah, this is the summer of our dreams. After seeing most of the girls wearing swimsuits, you should at least grow some interest with one of them," commented Hondou.

"I mean, look at Hirata. He's having lots of fun with Karuizawa, ain't he?"

"Though they haven't been that flirty these days."

I tried thinking of a reply while watching Akito and Ken play around with some of our classmates.

"Hmm... Then I'll give you a preface to my answer," I said. "I kinda classified the relationship commitments in high school into two types. One of them's the '*fleeting type*'. You date for some months, get to know each other, then break up if it doesn't work out. According to some people; it's a healthy way of expanding your social knowledge."

"And the second type?" asked Kikuchi.

"The other one's the '*all-in*' type, I guess. You can say that it's the type with a more traditional or conservation outlook on romantic relationships."



"So, you're saying that you're the latter?" asked Ijuuin.

I nod in response.

"Ohh, so that's why you're taking this long. Ohoho, aren't you the pure type, Ayanokouji?" Hondou nudged me with a smirk.

To be honest, I don't really care too much about the type of commitments whatsoever...

I could always go with my typical *"I just don't feel that way about anyone yet"* reply, but their concerns make sense. It would've been fine if I was a loner that got along with no one, but I'm Class B's leader and I'm surrounded by a lot of amazing girls. Anyone in my position would have a crush or two, or even a girlfriend.

For now, I'm just trying to bide some time until I can really find a girl whom I want to date.

*And besides... even if I find someone that I genuinely like... in the end, I'll...*

"Ah, so you want your first girlfriend to be someone that you'd think of marrying in the future?" pondered Professor. "But wouldn't it be hard if *your* girlfriend was the one who wanted to break up with you?"

"Well, I guess marriage would be nice. But of course, even if I'm the *'all-in type'*, I'm aware that I won't be able to save my relationship if the other party wants out. It would still be better to break up and move on. No point in clinging to the relationship if you're the only one working for it," I replied.

"You'll be an obsessive stalker in the making if you push further," chuckled Onizuka.

"Sounds a lot like you."

"Hey, I haven't even experienced being in a relationship let alone a break-up!"

"Ayanokouji's the same, right?"

"But he sounds like an expert, though."

"Of course. It's Ayanokouji, after all."

"You must be lying about not having any ex-girlfriends, aren't you?"

"I'm not." I sighed while looking away.

I can confidently say that I have no relationship experience. The only reason why I didn't seem like I was talking out of my ass is due to the power of research and the internet!

To be honest, it's been a pretty interesting experience reading things like light novels and manga. Because I don't have to worry about my academics, I have all the time in the world to binge and consume those types of media. And by doing so, I also gained the ability to keep up with my male friends who talk about this stuff.

"How about upperclassmen?" asked Kikuchi.



"O-Ohh! You're right! There were quite a lot of hotties on the upper grades."

"Kouenji has been playing around with the third years, hasn't he? Maybe we could ask him."

"Nah, dude. I doubt he'd tell us a name."

"There's a really pretty girl from the second year, though!"

"What's her name again...? Asahina-senpai..." mused Miyamoto.

"I don't know who Asahina-senpai is, but let's talk about Kiryuuin-senpai! She's really beautiful!" exclaimed Hondou.

The guys started their own forum about some upperclassmen as a result. Since this trip was for freshmen only, they didn't have to worry about getting overheard by the subjects of their topics.

I looked around us.

I can recognize every single first-year student by their face. But even if I can do so, it's not like they're making any sort of impression on me.

Of course, one student is an exception. There's no way she wouldn't stand out.

"Honami-chan, catch!"

"Woah, Mako-chan, that's too high!"

"Oh crap, I was about to enter the deep end."

"Just swim! It's easy!"

A group of Class C girls was attracting a lot of attention. It's not because they were too loud since everyone was making the same amount of noise. It's also not about their beach ball activities since other groups were doing the same fun ventures.

The reason why a lot of eyes were on them was due to Ichinose Honami's presence. Clad in a very pretty pink frilled two-piece, Ichinose was absolute eye candy for the people in the area. Of course, that's not downplaying her friends who were also attractive in their own rights.

After some minutes, the guys in my classes decided to swim around, too. Professor and I were left to watch the table. He was tasked to guard the area, fiddling with his laptop while I get drinks for everyone.

I ended up behind a short line of people.

"Ibuki?"

"Ayanokouji..." Ibuki winced upon seeing my face.

Woah, what revulsion. Does she hate me or something?

"Are you going to get some drinks, too?" I asked.

Ibuki was also on her swimsuit. However, just like Karuizawa on the island, she was wearing a jacket on top of it.

"..."

"How cold. You were the one pressing for a conversation



yesterday."

"Then spill it out. How did you know that Ryuuen lured you there? And why didn't you write my name?"

Her directness can really overwhelm people...

"Calm yourself down a bit. The girls in front of you are getting scared."

"Tch..." Ibuki awkwardly averted her glare away from me.

"Fine... There's no harm in telling you since Ryuuen himself already knows. But for now, let's just wait in line," I sighed in resignation. "Are you with anyone?"

"I'm alone."

"Alright, we can talk at our table. My classmates are busy swimming in the pool and my buddy, Sotomura, is busy with his laptop. We can chat in peace there."

Ibuki turned around and stayed silent.

After making a delayed order for the boys and getting two cold drinks for me and Professor, Ibuki and I sat across from each other with our beverage in hand.

"Ryuuen must've told you already, right? You wanted our leader's name-- I knew that right from the start."

"How...? I don't recall letting my guard down at all... Even if you managed to see the camera in my bag, you wouldn't necessarily think that it's used for espionage."

There were two items in the manual that proved vital to Ryuuen's plan. First was the camera and second were the walkie-talkies. Those rental cameras were meant for taking memorable photos while the walkie-talkies were used to prevent anyone from getting lost.

It *was* their intended purpose. However, because of the test's nature, those two items were used for other things.

"That's why I didn't question you. I know you'd just make an excuse."

"Well, you're right. Ryuuen prepared a story if that ever happens."

"But my suspicion didn't come from your camera. The moment you arrived in our camp, I already knew that something wasn't right." Ibuki stayed silent while lightly drinking from her straw. "Your fingers were dirty due to the soil."

Her eyes widened in realization. Ibuki exhaled with a light scoff, probably towards herself.

"So after you investigated the hole where I hid my walkie-talkie, you manipulated me into taking a photo of your key card..."

"And for the case with Ryuuen, I was just lucky. Even if I knew that he lured me into your base, I couldn't have been sure that he



planned to change leaders. After all, no other student could be found," I shrugged. "In the end, I almost didn't detect someone's presence if it weren't for my catfight with him. I didn't even know that it was you. My suspicion was only solidified when I noticed the holly berries on his side."

Ibuki sighed in exasperation.

"Both of you are ridiculous, you know that?"

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"Do whatever you want. Just know that I don't like both of you. I hate Ryuuen's guts and I hate that you acted like a weakling."

"Like a weakling?"

Must've been when I refused to fight back against Ryuuen.

"You know how to fight, don't you?" Ibuki narrowed her eyes.

"Ahh, so you noticed, after all."

"Of course, I would. Even Ryuuen did. I don't like the way you act dumb and hold yourself back."

I can get where she's coming from. For a well-trained fighter, seeing someone hold themselves back in a fight would be insulting. It's blatant disrespect for the opponent.

"Well, I can fight, yes. But that wasn't the time to show off my skills. It's a waste of energy, too. It's not like you advertise your fighting skills in front of others, right?"

"Of course. I'm not an idiot," she replied before asking. "So you'll fight seriously when the conditions are right?"

"Sure, but I'd like to avoid physical conflict as much as possible."

"Do you think you can beat Ryuuen?"

Ah... She really is a competitive one, huh? Well, it's pretty nice to have a conversation with someone from Class D, so I don't mind telling her about myself a bit.

"Probably... But it'd be close. You've seen how sloppy my dodges were, right? Even if I was holding back."

"Stop lying. I was fooled at first, but that last move... Everything you did prior to that was total bull. As a fighter, Ryuuen is stronger than most of the guys in school, but if you can perfectly fend him away, even if you caught him off-guard that time... there's no way it would be close." Ibuki drew closer as she continued speaking. "I was observing your physique back then, too. It's not that apparent at first glance, but your body is highly toned. Since I had no way of determining how dense your muscles are, I can't estimate the power behind one of your blows."

Ibuki Mio... She's a lot more skilled than I thought...

"Fine, fine. I could beat Ryuuen, but you're overestimating me if you think I'd have it easy. And of course, fighting against professionals is another thing."



"Fight with me." Ibuki placed both of her hands on the table as she said those words.

"Are you a professional?"

"Hah? I didn't say that. I just want you to fight with me without any of us holding back. If you're really as strong as I'm making you out to be, then I might lose... but I still want to fight you."

"You might get disappointed, you know?"

"That's fine with me."

Ibuki's spirited attitude is a pain, but interesting at the same time. It shows how much she cares about her strength in martial arts.

"Tell me about yourself first, then. I can't be the only one who's getting interrogated."

"Fine, what do you want to know?" Ibuki replied in an instant.

She was surprisingly easy to negotiate with... Well, as long as she gets what she wants.

"Do you have any friends?"

"I'm not fond of my classmates. There's no way I can get along with them."

"Surely, some of them are nice enough to be friends with you."

"Friends? I don't know about that. I don't need friends, anyway. But sure, there are some nice people."

"Like Kaneda? He seems like a good dude. When I met him on the island with Ichinose's class, he was being really cooperative. Was he acting?"

"Of course, idiot. Kaneda's probably the smartest student in our class. He's logical and calculating. That's why he's part of Ryuuen's main forces. He's not a douchebag like him, though."

"Are there any other notable students in your class like you and Kaneda?"

"Don't push your luck, Ayanokouji. I told you all of that in the spirit of fairness. If you want more information, then fight me."

"You might be getting the wrong idea here, Ibuki." I leaned back and took a big sip from my drink. "The information that you told me just now was the price for what I told you at the start. If you want to fight with me, then..."

I finished my sentence with a shrug.

"You..." Ibuki glared at me in annoyance.

"So, it'd be great if you can give me more information. I might consider sparring with you by then."

Ibuki's eyes looked bored. She sighed and stood up before taking her drink.

"I'm not uncivilized like Ryuuen or his delinquent lackeys, so I won't jump on you whenever I get the chance. But I'll make sure we can face each other one day."



"I hope that day doesn't come... I don't like trouble, after all."

Ibuki left with her drink in hand. Somehow, she reminds me of Horikita a little bit.

August 8th, 4:00 PM.

I finally decided to stay out of the pool and hang out with Airi and Haruka.

It was fun talking to them, but the three of us were pretty bored. I laid my forehead on the table and sighed audibly.

"Look at those two idiots play like children." Haruka watched Ken and Akito with a warm smile.

"Akito-kun didn't have any close friends back on the first month, right? I'm glad that he and Ken-kun get along very well with the other boys now," said Airi.

"Yep. Aren't you bummed out, Kiyopon? If you weren't wounded, I'm sure you'll be zooming across the entire pool with your swimming skills!" Haruka gestured with her arms.

Airi, who was beside me, gently caressed my hair. Her soft hand's comforting movements are making me sleepy. Crap... I shouldn't have let myself loose during lunch. (Had lunch at 2:00 PM-- a big one, too.)

If it were the old Airi, I'm she would be too embarrassed to do something like this. But I guess we're close enough to be this comfortable.

"I'm glad you weren't in grave danger, Kiyotaka-kun. I don't know what I'd do if one of my friends gets hurt like that." I wasn't facing Airi's direction, so I couldn't see her face. But judging from her tone, she might've been smiling in relief.

*\*Yawn\**

The perfectly warm breeze is adding more to my dizziness. I fixed my position by laying my crossed arms on the table, using them as a pillow.

"You can sleep if you want, Kiyotaka-kun. We'll be here with you until Ken-kun and Akito-kun finish their swimming, right Haruka-chan?" Airi said as she continued caressing my hair.

"O-Oh, yeah. We've only been here for a little over an hour, anyway. They might keep playing for another hour and a half," replied Haruka.

My eyes were closed so I couldn't see Haruka's face, but it sounded like she was a bit distracted when Airi asked her.

"Yes. We'll wake you up, by then. Of course, if you want to sleep comfortably in your room, that's also an option."

"Nah... I think I'll be fine with taking a nap here. Just... a short nap."



I'm too lazy to get up at this point... I'll let my sleepiness pass by for about thirty minutes or so...

I say that, but I'm still a little bit conscious...

"He's really adorable sometimes... Kiyotaka-kun, I mean," chuckled Airi.

"Ahaha, he is. We're lucky that we get to see him like this, aren't we?" said Haruka.

"Mn..."

"Hey, Airi, why don't you take a picture of him? This is a super rare chance!"

"E-Eh...? Kiyotaka-kun might get angry..."

"Nah, he won't. It's just a simple picture, anyway. It's not like we're showing it to everyone..."

The conversation paused for a bit.

"Yeah... No way we'll show it to anyone else."

"Mn."

A light click could be heard before they continued talking.

"His sleeping face is so cute~! Send this along with everything else when we get back, alright, Airi? We'll complete our friend group's photo album together!"

"Of course! We've taken quite a lot of pictures. Even I can't believe it..."

"I'm the same, and I'm sure those two oafs are, too. We were all loners for the first month, but now we're great friends."

"I'm happy I met you guys."

"You've said a bunch of times already, Airi-chan~. You're so cute."

"Ehehe... It's all thanks to Horikita-san for putting us under Kiyotaka-kun's tutelage."

"Guess so. Who knew that this sleeping guy right here would be our close friend, right?"

"Yeah... Kiyotaka-kun's the smartest student in school. He's really popular with the girls, too. Until now, I still can't believe that I'm actually friends with him."

"Hey, hey, you're blushing, you know?"

"E-Eh-? Stop teasing me, Haruka-chan!"

"Ahaha, I'm not~! If only you can see yourself right now..." chuckled Haruka.

"H-Hmph... If you talk about Kiyotaka-kun, I'm sure you'll start blushing, as well."

"You're right on that~! And it would be quite bad."

"Do you think he's noticed yet?" Airi asked with a gentle tone.

"I don't know. Kiyopon might look, sound, and even act dense... but he's not stupid."



"Oh... You're right."

The conversation reached a stopped. However, it was but a brief stop.

"I won't lose, Airi."

"Yep, me too, Haruka-chan."

My consciousness slowly slipped away around that time.

August 8th, 4:35 PM.

"Mm..."

"Oh? Kiyopon is waking up from his slumber!"

"How was your nap, Kiyotaka-kun?"

"It was alright, I guess..."

*"Were you guys talking about me while I was asleep?"* was what I wanted to say as a topic opener, but I knew it would be a bad idea.



## SS.16 - Troubles in Paradise

August 8th, 6:00 PM.

There were quite a bunch of girls walking in and out of their rooms on the 4th deck. That's why it wasn't too embarrassing to go here right now. A lot of guys were hanging out with their female friends (or maybe girlfriends), so there wasn't any reason for me to feel out of place.

I finally reached my destination, but before I managed to bring myself to knock on the door, the voices of Horikita and Mori reached my ears.

"Was that name really alright...?"

"It's fiiine~. It's a nice wordplay on your name, isn't it? And besides, with that name, no one would guess that the user is you. Isn't that better?"

"Well... you're right."

"See? Don't worry about it, Horikita-san. Or perhaps, are you envious of my cool name?"

"Impossible. Don't get ahead of yourself, Mori-san. I couldn't care less."

"Okay~. Whatever you say."

It seems like they're having a pretty nice conversation. I don't know what it's about, though.

*\*Knock\**

"Hm? Who's here?"

"It must be Ayanokouji-kun," Horikita replied as she got up to the door.

I sent her a text prior so she should be expecting me.

"Yo," I greeted.

"Woah, it really is him. Did you invite Ayanokouji-kun to hang out, perhaps?"

"Hmm, strictly speaking... that would not be the case."

"I'm just here to chill. I can leave if I'm being a bother, though."

"Ah, no, no, not at all. Feel free to cuddle with Horikita-san on the bed."

"Mori-san." Horikita faced her with a sharp glare.

"Ahaha, I was joking~, " she shrugged with a chuckle.

Ohh, someone finally gets her personality, huh?

"Sorry about this, Horikita. I tried my best today, you know? But



socializing really is draining."

"I see. Well, feel free to sit around. I'll continue reading my book."

"That's such a loner thing to say, Ayanokouji-kun," teased Mori.

"Or at least, that's what I would've said if I weren't the same."

"The same?"

"You've been hanging out with your friends since morning, right? Even an average normie wouldn't be able to do that. I'm also mentally drained today. That's why I'm here. Horikita-san's keeping me company~."

"I'm not. I was just reading this entire time."

If I remember correctly, Horikita's roommates are Mori, Rino, and Ishikura.

"Oh, you don't have to be so shy. We've talked about tons of stuff since yesterday, right?"

"I suppose that's true." Horikita sighed as she opened her book again. "Well then. Now that you have someone to talk with, I hope you can let me read in peace."

"Wouldn't our noise bother you?" I asked.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun's willing to have a chat!"

"I don't mind at all. Talk all you want," replied Horikita.

"We'll take you up on that offer then."

Horikita leaned against the wall while I sat on the edge of the bed, right in front of her.

"Wanna talk about Horikita?"

*\*Thud\**

"Ow, hey!" I groaned in pain after Horikita struck my flank with a kick.

"Don't involve me in whatever gossip you're about to take part in, or else, I'll kick you again, but this time, all the way out of the room." Horikita glowered with a deep voice.

I looked back at her on reflex and my eyes were instinctively drawn to her snow-white legs. It's a good thing that Horikita was wearing shorts instead of a skirt or else my face would've been targeted by another kick.

"I'm very sorry, madam."

"Ahaha, I never knew you had this dynamic. How amusing." Mori laughed heartily after seeing our usual shenanigans.

Mori and I chatted about a lot of stuff. First and foremost, I told her the reason why I was here. It was simple. I actually wanted to rest in my own room, but Kouenji was there. The atmosphere becomes really weird and uncomfortable when I'm alone with that guy. I'm sure the same goes for Yukimura.

If it's Hirata, though... he can probably handle it.

Inevitably, I was asked about my love life. However, I also



noticed that I was getting more and more comfortable with those types of topics. I must've been getting used to hearing about them.

Regardless, it was fun. She and I got to know each other better. Mori got along with almost everyone, just like Satou. She also hangs out with Ike and the other guys, which was probably the reason why she's really easy to chat with.

Time passed by pretty quickly. It wasn't long until five other girls walked inside the room: Karuizawa, Ichihashi, Shinohara, Maezono, and Rino.

"Eh-? Ayanokouji-kun?" Shinohara was the first one to react.

"Hey." I raised a hand to greet them.

"Are you hanging out with Horikita-san... or Nene-chan...? Or maybe both?" Rino asked with a smirk.

"And in the girls' room, too. Despite your seemingly harmless demeanor, you're quite the bold one, Ayanokouji-kun," added Maezono.

"Well, well. As much as I'm curious about what the deal here is, I think we have to go. The other girls should arrive in a few minutes," shrugged Ichihashi. "For now, you should rest well, Rinocchi."

"Ruri's right. It's a shame that Rinocchi can't come, though. Like, you were the most enthusiastic about this, too." teased Karuizawa.

"K-Karuizawa-san, you didn't have to say that..." Rino replied with a flustered expression.

"We'll tell you the deets on the group chat, so don't worry. Just rest if you're not feeling well," she said.

Karuizawa aloofly exited the room with a simple "*Let's go.*" as the other girls followed-- of course after briefly saying goodbye to us.

Mori and I looked at Rino, who laid down comfortably on her bed.

"We were supposed to meet up with some girls from other classes. I couldn't come with them cuz' of my headache, though," she said, sensing our curiosity.

"Ohh, that's unfortunate," said Mori.

"It's fine. I'll have lots of other opportunities next time, anyway." Rino sighed with a shrug. "How about you two? How're your groups?"

"I don't know about Ken, but the others are probably resting now, too," I replied.

"Maya might be hanging out with the other two in their room right now. I would've been there if I wasn't burnt out for the day," answered Mori.

*"The other two"* must be referring to Matsushita and Sonoda.

"Well, it's getting quite late, so I'll be going on ahead."

"Ehh, I just got here. I wanted to have a chat with you, too~,



pouted Rino.

"Sure, maybe next time. You should rest for now."

"Bye-bye, Ayanokouji-kun! Let's hang out again next time," waved Mori.

"Thanks for allowing me to sit on your bed, Horikita."

"Just the thanks is enough." Horikita glanced at me with an exasperated sigh.

August 8th, 10:00 PM.

I was currently laying on my bed... while chatting with two girls on the phone. One was my friend and my classmate; Ichihashi Ruri. The other one was also my friend but was not my classmate; Ichinose Honami.

With Ichinose:

*(10:10 PM) [You sure?]*

*(10:10 PM) [Yep.]*

*(10:10 PM) [It'd leave a little scar at worst.]*

*(10:10 PM) [I see.]*

*(10:10 PM) [That's great, then.]*

*(10:10 PM) [By the way, I wanted to talk to you about the results.]*

*(10:10 PM) [Are you free tomorrow?]*

*(10:11 PM) [Tomorrow?]*

*(10:11 PM) [I don't really have any plans, so yeah.]*

*(10:11 PM) [What time?]*

*(10:12 PM) [Is 3:00 PM alright with you?]*

*(10:14 PM) [Yeah, sure.]*

*(10:14 PM) [Do you have a place in mind?]*

*(10:14 PM) [Is the rest area on the 6th deck fine with you?]*

*(10:14 PM) [Hoshinomiya-sensei and I have an appointment there tomorrow.]*

*(10:15 PM) [No problem.]*

*(10:15 PM) [I'll be there.]*

*(10:15 PM) [I'll ask Kanzaki-kun, too, if that's fine with you.]*

*(10:15 PM) [Of course.]*

*(10:15 PM) [Can I bring Horikita with me then?]*

*(10:19 PM) [That's a nice idea.]*

*(10:19 PM) [Kanzaki-kun said okay, too.]*

*(10:19 PM) [Alright, I'll see you tomorrow.]*

*(10:21 PM) [Yes, good night!]*

*(10:21 PM) [Good night.]*

With Ichihashi:

*(10:10 PM) [It's pretty awkward, of course, but I'm managing somehow.]*

*(10:11 PM) [Being neutral is hard, but I think it fits you.]*



(10:11 PM) [Really?]

(10:11 PM) [I'm not so sure about that.]

(10:11 PM) [You're probably the most mature in your friend group.]

(10:11 PM) [That's also why you haven't chosen one side over the other, right?]

(10:12 PM) [Mature?]

(10:12 PM) [Hahaha, well, my friends do say that, but I'm not that mature.]

(10:12 PM) [That's true.]

(10:12 PM) [You make childish mistakes sometimes.]

(10:13 PM) [Ugh...]

(10:13 PM) [I'm sorry, okay?!]

(10:13 PM) [Of course, I make mistakes! I'm not as perfect as Chiaki-chan or Kushida-san.]

(10:13 PM) [Though I can't help but feel embarrassed whenever I remember the misunderstanding I've caused.]

(10:13 PM) [I really thought Horikita-san would hate me forever, you know?!]

(10:13 PM) [It's fine, to be honest.]

(10:13 PM) [Horikita's not that narrow-minded.]

(10:13 PM) [And besides, anyone in your position at that time would've also arrived at the same conclusion.]

(10:13 PM) [There was no other way around it.]

(10:13 PM) [By the way, Ayanokouji-kun.]

(10:13 PM) [Do you have some time tomorrow?]

(10:15 PM) [Hmm.]

(10:15 PM) [I have all morning, then after three.]

(10:16 PM) [I see.]

(10:16 PM) [Can I talk to you around six then?]

(10:18 PM) [Sure.]

(10:18 PM) [What's it about?]

(10:20 PM) [It's a secret for now.]

(10:20 PM) [I'll tell you personally tomorrow.]

(10:21 PM) [Alright.]

(10:23 PM) [Okay, that's great!]

(10:23 PM) [Good night, Ayanokouji-kun.]

(10:25 PM) [Good night.]

Ichihashi has long been consulting me or Hirata about her problems with the girl groups. She was initially close with Kikyou and her friends but slowly hung out with Karuizawa's group more. Of course, she was still friends with everyone, much like most of us.

However, very few people were aware of the "cold war" that was happening inside the classroom-- at least with the girls. As everyone's angel, Kikyou tends to be impartial with everyone. But I,



for one, know how much she hates Karuizawa and her gal friends. Passive aggression and subtle verbal attacks are still among the many things that they tend to do with the other girls in class. Weak-willed girls like Inogashira and Mii-chan were often targeted. In fact, there were rare times when even Airi was on the receiving end.

If Airi didn't have the Ayanokouji Group, she might've been the prime target.

Going back to the topic at hand, Ichihashi had been stressed out by the current situations. It's a good thing that the girls had been interacting with other classes because they had more topics for conversations. After all, when they run out of things to things to talk about, they either start to gossip or make fun of other people in the class.

When I heard her the whole story, Karuizawa and her friends were painted in some kind of *"stereotypical high school bitches"* type of image, but I knew that it's just the natural course of events, especially in the high school setting. That said, I'm not saying that their bullying, no matter how mild, is justified.

Poking fun at others was normal among any friend group. It's all about the intensity and malice, in my personal opinion. According to what Ichihashi has told me, there really weren't any malicious intentions behind their gossips so I guess that's fine. Ichihashi knows that, too.

I know that Karuizawa was just acting how a strong-willed pack leader should act. She's been slowly sharing more of her past with me in these few months, and it's become apparent that Karuizawa knew very little of how to properly handle the situations where she's required to assert her position. Karuizawa might not be aware of it, but whenever she's stuck on a dead-end, she ends up mimicking what her past bullies were doing to her.

She ends up overdoing things a lot of the time, so I should probably address that issue soon.

Ah, manga and light novels are great. My takeaways from every read aren't something that one can learn from educational or academic books. I know nothing about the social intricacies between high school girls, but I can still put things into perspective because of the stories I've read. Of course, I always consult Professor and the others to know if the scenarios I'm studying were really reflected in real life. A lot of modern mangakas are very skillful in writing them, too.

Case in point, I still have a lot of responsibilities as the class leader. If I continue to progress my social knowledge, I might just be able to do one-tenth of what Hirata can.



At first, I always thought that observing from the outside would serve me well as someone who's curious about what normal high school life is. But as time goes on, it's become apparent that being in the frontline yields so much more to sate my inquisitiveness.



## SS.17 - Much To Learn

August 9th, 3:30 PM.

"I guess that explains a lot of what happened." Ichinose held her chin with a somber expression.

"We left out some details, of course. I hope you don't mind," I said.

"Oh, no problem. We're already grateful for the fact that you shared some information at all. Right, Kanzaki-kun?"

"Yes. We've done a lot of theorizing, and even though the conclusion we had was accurate, we wouldn't have confirmed anything if it weren't for your help," he nodded.

Ichinose wanted answers, so I gave her some. I didn't ask for anything in return since Ichinose wouldn't either if she was in my position.

"All of us got a taste of how unforgiving the special tests can be. In the end, we're all going to compete against each other. That said, do you still want to continue our alliance?" asked Horikita.

"You're right, Horikita-san. One simple mistake threw our hard work down the drain. Ayanokouji-kun's extreme measures led Class B to victory while we stayed naive." Ichinose smiled bitterly before facing us with a serious expression. "However, I want my class to improve, too. I want everyone in Class C to grow at their own pace. That's why our current goal is to maintain our position while looking for opportunities to take the lead."

"Ichinose and I have anticipated your question, Horikita-san. As we are now, overtaking Class B let alone Class A is a tough feat. That's why we want to prioritize stability," added Kanzaki.

"In other words, you intend to keep the alliance intact," said Horikita.

"That's right. Having Class B as an ally would certainly help us down the line," Ichinose replied with a smile.

"Wouldn't Class A be a better option as an ally?" she asked.

Well, a question like that would be right up Ichinose Honami's alley.

"Is that what your logic states, Horikita-san?"

"Yes, I think it's a very reasonable query."

"Well, the answer is obvious. Ayanokouji-kun is a close friend of mine. If I were to choose between him or Class A, there wouldn't



even be a competition." With a bright smile, Ichinose shed light on the piece that Horikita missed. "That's what *my* logic states."

"A friend... I see," she pondered.

The old Horikita might've called it nonsense. But given her growth along with Ichinose's abilities, she took her words very seriously.

"It's because I can trust Ayanokouji-kun to some degree. I've known him since the first week of school, you know? We've been friends even before the S-System got revealed to us."

"Trust, huh...?"

"Oh, nevermind. That's not the case for you guys, right? After all, someone figured out the S-System in your class from the very start--someone smart... very smart~." Ichinose eyed me with a teasing smirk.

As expected, Class A and D weren't the only ones who would find me out. After all, it's Ichinose we're talking about.

"It was only a matter of time," I shrugged. "I, along with the class, withheld that information for a whole month. Sorry if I didn't say anything even though we were already friends back then."

"Ahaha! Don't worry about that, Ayanokouji-kun! It's surprising for sure. But I think our class would've done the same thing, to be honest." Ichinose joyfully deflected my apology. She probably didn't want me to feel guilty about it.

"You've shown great academic excellence and athleticism since the start of school. You also figured out the truth about the S-System before anyone else. And of course, you've been leading Class B while producing stellar results." Kanzaki narrated with his usual expression. "No matter how anyone looks at it, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is one of the most excellent students in our year, if not the entire student body... That's why your placing in Class D is a big mystery to everyone."

The atmosphere tensed up for a brief second before Kanzaki continued.

"Well, if our theories about the class distribution are correct, then I guess Class D lucked out with getting you," he shrugged, smilingly. "Even if they consider your lack of social abilities as a flaw, placing you in Class A or B would still be appropriate, I think."

"Ooh, Ayanokouji-kun in our class, huh? Wouldn't that be fun?" giggled Ichinose.

"If you were in our class, we might be Class A by now," said Kanzaki.

Interesting. I wonder what would've happened if I were to be placed in Ichinose's class right at the start.

"Ayanokouji-kun is *our* class leader. There's no use in fantasizing



about something that won't happen," sighed Horikita.

"Oh, but it *can* happen, Horikita-san." Ichinose faced her with a meaningful smile. "If we can obtain 20 million private points... then it's but one transaction away."

Horikita's expression shifted almost imperceptibly, but she didn't lose her cool.

"20 million points are useless if the person himself doesn't want to go, right?"

Horikita and Ichinose faced me with different expressions. Kanzaki glanced away indifferently. Hey, don't leave me out here...

"Ayanokouji-kun, what do you think?" asked Ichinose.

"Yeah, what do you think?" followed Horikita.

"I'm sure you have a lot of friends in your current class, but everyone in mine would welcome you all the same. I'd even rescind my own leadership for you if you want."

The wrong answer could spell my death.

"Well... I'm sure it'll be fun to be in the same class as you guys..." Horikita's face started to resemble that of an oni-- a beautiful oni, but an oni regardless. "But I'll stick with my current class. It'd be pretty weird to transfer classes without a proper reason, anyway."

After hearing the rest of my statement, Horikita glanced at Ichinose with a neutral expression. I noticed the slight twitch of her lips-- as though she was keeping herself from smirking.

"Ah, what a bummer. My classmates would've been overjoyed if you said yes." Ichinose shrugged while chuckling as if she expected my answer from the start. "It was worth the try, though."

To be honest, it felt strange seeing Ichinose tease Horikita like that. Horikita wasn't even aware that she was being teased.

"That's enough for the jokes, Ichinose. We've conveyed our intentions quite clearly with this meeting," sighed Kanzaki. "We won't inconvenience you any longer, Ayanokouji, Horikita-san."

"Ahaha~! My bad just now, Horikita-san. It must've been the 90-minute full-body massage that I spent with Hoshinomiya-sensei earlier."

Ah... That explains it.

August 9th, around 6:00 PM.

"Ayanokouji-kun, did you wait long?" Ichihashi scuttled near as soon as she saw me.

"I just got here," I replied.

The two of us were currently hanging out on the starboard side of the ship's main deck. I subtly glanced towards the girl beside me and observed her appearance. The cute hair clip that I've rarely seen her wear, the smell of feminine perfume, a hint of make-up on



her face, and a very simple yet fashionable set of clothes...

Ichihashi was a pretty girl, to say the least. Combined with her efforts to look attractive, she could make any man's heart race.

I had a feeling that things would end up like this, but I never had any real expectations until now.

"Do you wanna get something to eat?" I asked.

"Let's stay here." Ichihashi held the railings and savored the breeze with a smile. "The sunset looks really pretty. It'd be a shame to miss it when we're already here."

"I see..." I sighed, turning my gaze towards the endless blue and orange gradient surrounding the ship.

I'll give her the reins of this conversation. Apart from giving a response, I don't think I can do much.

Sensing the change in atmosphere, Ichihashi faced me with a serious expression.

"I'm sure you've noticed it but..." Ichihashi smiled bitterly. "I like you, Ayanokouji-kun. It's been that way for a while now."

I returned her stare as a sign of my attention, but I chose to stay silent.

"You don't look surprised. Well, even if you were surprised, it's not like it'd show on your face, anyway," she chuckled.

"You know me too well."

"I'm closer to you than most of the girls in the class, after all... if you don't count Maya, Chiaki, Kikyuu-chan, Karuizawa-san, Hasebe-san, Sakura-san, and Horikita-san." Ichihashi smilingly shrugged with a defeated expression.

She was right. If I were to be critical about my social relationships, then those seven girls would be my closest female friends in the class. Between Ichihashi, Mori, Mii-chan, and Onodera... Well, either of them could come in eighth, I guess.

Of course, subtle technicalities like closeness couldn't really be ranked... And that hardly matters right now.

"Would you become my boyfriend?"

Ichihashi Ruri. She was strong-willed like Karuizawa and mature like Matsushita. If I accept her confession, I might just get the normal high school life that I always wished for. Unlike Inogashira, she'd be a lot more resilient if my enemies ever attempt to target her.

However...

"I'm sorry."

Even after hearing my answer, Ichihashi's smile didn't break.

"I see. To be honest, I already expected this outcome." Ichihashi rested her forearms on the railings with a sigh. "Has any other girl confessed their feelings to you yet, Ayanokouji-kun?"



"One," I replied honestly.

"Ohh, someone beat me to the punch, huh? They're good," Ichihashi chuckled before her expression turned melancholic. "But you rejected her, too."

"Yeah, I did. I also told her that it didn't really matter whether it was her or any other girl. I just felt like getting in a relationship right now isn't the right choice."

"Ahaha, that's unfortunate. Not just for her or for me."

"I've heard about it. Some girls in the class see me in a romantic light, correct?"

"Mhm~. Do you find that strange?"

"Personally, I do... But..."

"Objectively speaking, you can say that it's perfectly natural." Ichihashi tilted her head with a smile. "You're smart, athletic, kind, cool, and handsome. The other hottie in our class, which is Hirata-kun, is already taken by Karuizawa-san. Developing a crush on you would make a lot of sense."

There's also the fact that the other guys in our class rarely act desirable around the girls. The same goes for Kouenji, who's treated like a weirdo by them. Ken and Yukimura might become popular at some point given their own merits, and according to Ichinose, a girl in her class has a crush on Akito. Mature-types like him and Kikuchi are very rare, especially since we're just in our first year.

Apart from those four, though...

"Is it alright if we stay friends?" she asked.

"That was my intention from the start."

"Then, I'm satisfied."

Unlike Inogashira's initial reaction, Ichihashi received my rejection with a considerable amount of composure. She'd obviously feel downtrodden, but she's not showing any obvious signs of emotional turmoil.

I wonder what I can do to cheer her up even a little. Maybe we could grab a bite?

"It's getting late and cold. Do you wanna drop by a restaurant or cafe for dinner?"

"Just now, were you thinking about how composed I am?" Ichihashi asked with a smirk.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"A woman's intuition, I guess," she answered with a teasing smile.

"Or at least... that's what I would've said."

Ichihashi retreated herself from the ship's edge and sat on the bench behind us.

"Normally, our conversation would've ended right after you rejected me. I might've run away crying while you reached your



hand out to my running figure. Oh~! What a tragedy!" She skillfully and dramatically mimed the scenario. "But because I stayed and continued smiling, you invited me out for dinner instead, maybe with the hopes of cheering me up. You clearly thought getting rejected didn't affect me that much."

At that moment, I realized my mistake.

She's right. I'm an idiot. Of course, she was hurt. The fact that I didn't pick up on that instantly reflects my inexperience.

"I'm sorry..."

"It's fine, Ayanokouji-kun. You don't have to feel guilty at all. I know you enough to tell that there wasn't anything bad with your intentions. In fact, I even feel grateful." Ichihashi continued to smile as she explained. "Ahaha... Really, that's such a you-move. Ah, don't worry, though. A lot of the girls find your innocence about romance quite charming."

Matsushita and Kikyou might've mentioned something like that before.

"I'll stay here," I said.

Ichihashi has indirectly told me about her current feelings. She was putting up a tough front this whole time.

"I see... Then, I think I'll be going ahead of you. Be sure to come inside soon. You might catch a cold," Ichihashi replied as she stood up.

She turned around without breaking her smile. I could hear her fading footsteps subtly increase in speed. And just like that, I've hurt another person without intending to do so.

Ichinose's right. It does feel awful...

Right now, I'm feeling emotionally uncomfortable. It's not pleasant, it's not delightful, nor is it gratifying in any way.

Surely, it's not a good feeling, but I could finally feel something, even if it's just a tiny bit of sadness. And ironically, it made me... happy. My curiosity heightened and I thought I really wanted to learn more.

*Author's Notes:*

*Ichihashi's personality is canon.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 1.1 - Prelude of a New Game

*I admire his abilities, much like how I admire Nii-san's.*

*"It doesn't look like he's aware of the last layer. We'll win, Horikita."*

*To think that there was someone like him. It's laughable how I even challenged him in the beginning.*

*"It'll be fine. Thanks for worrying about me."*

*He was my first "friend". I never thought I'd think of someone like that.*

*"It's necessary. I'm sure Hirata won't like it once everything's revealed, though."*

*If it's with him, I believe I can learn more and improve myself.*

*"This little bit of rain is quite a nuisance, but it helped with our plan..."*

*"It certainly did."*

*"Well, anyway, I'm leaving this key card to you, Horikita."*

*"I understand, Ayanokouji-kun. I'll acquire those last points without a problem."*

*"-rikita? Horikita...? 'You alright?'"*

*"Oh, yes. Pardon me. I was just remembering something."*

*"I see," Ayanokouji-kun replied before continuing his meal. "I'm surprised, though. The food here is better than I thought."*

*"It's not a luxury restaurant for nothing."*

*"Yeah, I can only imagine the number of private points we'd spend if this vacation wasn't free."*

*Speaking of which, I still have 359,872 private points thanks to our high amount of monthly class points. It would've been ideal if all Class B students practiced the same amount of prudence, but according to Mori-san, it seems like a lot of our classmates have spent an excessive amount of points on things like cosmetics or games. Some of them were estimated to have 100,00 to 150,000 private points left.*

*With that being said, it's now the 10th of August. Ayanokouji-kun*



invited me to have breakfast with him, so we're currently eating at a restaurant on the 9th deck.

We've eaten together a lot in the past. However, most of them had secondary purposes like meeting about the class and such. It doesn't seem to be the case right now, but I guess he invited me because I was the only one awake. We got here around 6:30 AM, so I imagine most of the students still lying comfortably on their beds by that time.

It was now a little bit past 7:00 AM. The two of us were almost done eating, so I asked Ayanokouji-kun about something that I've been wondering about.

"Do you think we'd be able to take the lead on the next special exam?"

Ayanokouji-kun continued eating the rest of his smoked pork baby back ribs before glancing at me.

"It depends. We don't even know what kind of exam it'll be let alone when. I doubt they'd give us another one during summer vacation, so we'd probably have to worry about it on the second semester."

"Do you think the exams happen once every semester? Personally, I don't think that's the case."

"I'm also inclined to think that it's not. We may have a trimester curriculum, but nine total special exams won't be enough for any class to make a comeback, especially if the gap is wide."

Indeed. Even if we include the midterm and final exams in the mix, the higher classes would still have the advantage since they're innately composed of more academically gifted students.

"We can only speculate until the next one, huh?" I muttered before going back to my original question. "Ayanokouji-kun... Do you think we can overtake Class A on the next special exam?"

Our plates were finally cleaned up of edible food. We relaxed on our chairs across from each other with the fancy round dining table separating us.

"I wish I could give you a concrete answer, but a lot of factors stop me from doing so. Of course, you already know what I'm talking about."

Yes... Firstly, we knew about the special exams before everyone else. After the island exam, the other classes won't be caught off-guard anymore. Secondly, Class A made a big blunder by making a deal with Ryuen-kun while having a traitor in their midst. And lastly... we haven't seen what the student named Sakayanagi Arisu is capable of just yet. Then again, I can't help but feel like Ayanokouji-kun would win against her.

I need to catch up soon. It's only a matter of time before we reach



Class A by solely relying on Ayanokouji-kun's overwhelming abilities. Once he takes a step back, it'll be up to me and Hirata-kun to lead the class with Karuizawa-san and Kushida-san's support...

August 10th, 11:00 AM.

I was walking out of the sun deck's hallway near the pool area after getting some alone time. When I got off the elevator, two of my classmates called out to me.

"Oh, speak of the devil! It's Ayanokouji-kun!" exclaimed Azuma.

Azuma Sana. Much like Ichihashi or Matsushita, she was close with Karuizawa and Kikyuu's group. She was also one of the smartest students in our class in terms of academics.

The students around us were conversing at the same level of enthusiasm so I barely heard her voice. In a twist of fate, the girl beside her was none other than Ichihashi.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun!" she greeted.

Ichihashi was a social butterfly from a young age. Along with her innately attractive appearance, she should be experienced in neutralizing romantic tension. Hence, she can naturally speak with me regardless of what happened yesterday.

"Hey," I greeted back.

"We were just talking about you." Azuma nudged me with a smirk.

"Me?"

"Yeah... I was telling her the story of my confession last night," Ichihashi answered with a smile.

Eh? Seriously? Is this the true power of mature girls...? It's honestly amazing how straightforward she can be.

"I see. Did you find it amusing, Azuma?" I asked.

At this point, I can only reply with the same amount of directness.

"Huh? What the hell's up with you two? No awkwardness whatsoever? Even after a rejection? Well, aren't you perfect for each other then? Just date already, geez. You can also explode in process, riauus." Azuma bludgeoned us with a bitter and spiteful comment. However, her smug expression told me that she was joking.

That's weird. I thought Azuma was also a riau-- albeit single.

"S-Sana, it's not like that. Ayanokouji-kun and I just don't like making the atmosphere pointlessly uncomfortable."

Ohh, Ichihashi really gets me.

"I know, I know. I was kidding," she chuckled. "Well, now that you're here, why don't you join us for lunch, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Before I could respond, my phone started vibrating. I didn't really



have any plans with anyone, so my friends might be calling to invite me for lunch.

"Haruka?"

*"Oh, Kiyopon~! Wanna have lunch with us? Ken's hanging out with Kikuchi-kun and the others right now, and Miyacchi had some business with Hirata-kun. So, Airi and I were wondering if you could join us for lunch."*

"Ahh, sorry, Haruka. I already have plans to eat with Azuma and Ichihashi." The two girls gasped in surprise. "Let's grab dinner as a group later. Is that alright?"

*"Oh, you had plans. Well, sure! We'll see you later then~!"*

We briefly hung up and I put my phone back inside my trusty pocket.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun, was that alright..." asked Azuma.

Our friendship wasn't so volatile and shallow where doubts and arguments would pop up just because one person bluntly declines an invitation to hang out.

"Yeah, why not?" I replied. "If you have any place in mind, then feel free to lead the way."

"Sigh... Okay, then." Azuma shrugged with a smile.

Ichihashi and I followed her silently as the atmosphere got warmer.

We ended up in a cafe. Like Palette, there were a lot of female customers inside. Luckily, there were four or five guys that I can suffer with. I wouldn't feel too embarrassed about spending my time here.

It was Azuma on my left, and Ichihashi on my right.

The three of us were friends, sure, but we were certainly a strange combination.

"Alright, why don't you continue your tale, Ruri? Let's make the man himself hear it." Azuma smirked at me.

"Uh... I don't think that's a good idea. It'd be pretty embarrassing for both of us." Ichihashi chuckled bitterly.

"Why not? We might see Ayanokouji-kun's... *flus-ter-ed* face... you know?" Azuma subtly leaned in on her with a teasing smile.

"Ah-- That's true..." Ichihashi replied with a wondering look.

"Oi, Ichihashi, don't stray from the righteous path," I retorted jokingly.

"Ahaha, well, I already heard everything up until Ruri left crying." Azuma sipped her milk tea with a shrugged.

"Sana!" Ichihashi panicked instantly.

"You were crying?" I asked.

"W-Well..." Ichihashi frantically tried to salvage the situation by forcing out a smile. "I was rejected, right? Of course, I'd feel sad. A



teardrop or two shouldn't be too weird."

"You were bawling your eyes out last night, though. Mae-chan and Satsuki were really worried, you know?"

Maezono and Shinohara? That's strange.

"Sana! Can you please stop outing me for one second?!" cried Ichihashi, whose face was flushed pink.

None of us gets to see Ichihashi's embarrassed expression that often. It's really cute, to say the least.

We ate up and chatted with each other. They were the ones who were mostly doing the talking, though.

Apparently, Azuma secretly swapped rooms with Airi last night. I thought it was strange since Maezono and Shinohara were Airi's roommates. Of course, Airi wasn't against the idea since Haruka was one of Azuma's roommates, as well.

They wouldn't do it again, though. Last night was an exception since she wanted to be there for Ichihashi. And it'd be bad if they get caught.

"So much for putting up a tough front in front of Ayanokouji-kun..." Ichihashi lowered her head in dejection.

"Don't mind it, Ruri. If Ayanokouji-kun rejects even you, then there's no way he'd accept anyone else!" Azuma tried to cheer for her friend with a thumbs up.

"Sure... Except for Chiaki-chan and Kushida-san, of course," shrugged Ichihashi.

"Oh... Right... Those two are on a level of their own... Haha..." Azuma replied with a flat tone.

"If they turn out to like Ayanokouji-kun, Maya and Horikita-san also have higher chances."

"Hmm... I'd say you're about as cute as Maya, but Horikita-san is really pretty, isn't she...?" Azuma evaluated the girls' looks with a serious expression. "Do you agree, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"You're asking me?" I pretended to think for a brief second. "Hmm... Well, I do think Horikita's pretty."

Ever since the start of school, I always thought that Horikita had the potential to become as popular as Kikyou if she had a bright personality like her.

"In my honest opinion, Horikita-san is about top two or three in our class when it comes to sheer beauty," said Ichihashi.

"If you're alright with me asking, who's the top one?"

"Ohoho~? It seems like our boy here is curious..." Azuma teasingly smirked at me. Wait, scratch that. Both of them were.

I shouldn't have asked.

"Well, for me... It'd be Chiaki-chan," Ichihashi replied candidly.

"Hmm... I'm the same, to be honest." Azuma followed with a



shrugged. "But of course, it's just our personal opinions."

"Yep~. I think it's just a matter of preferences, anyway. Like, in terms of cuteness, Kushida-san would definitely top everyone in our class," said Ichihashi.

Subjectivity is one hell of an idea, isn't it? Rooting back to the works of Descartes and Kant, it's been something that we as humans have been relying on whenever there's no objective reality to lean our backs against.

Judging someone's face can branch out in many ways. Cuteness, prettiness, beauty-- there are many words to categorize someone's facial appeal. However, people have different preferences depending on what kind of face looks most pleasurable to their eyes.

"How about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Who do you think is the prettiest girl in class?" asked Azuma.

"Hmm..." I pondered before my eyes reflexively widened.

"Hehh~... So you do have someone. It's fine, if you tell us, Ayanokouji-kun. We won't tell a soul," smiled Azuma.

You just spilled the secrets of your best friend in front of me. And with that grin on your face, do you really think I'd believe that?

"Not really..." I shook my head in response. "I've never thought about it that way. To me, if I think someone looks pretty, then that's that."

"Ehh? I totally thought you had a girl in mind." Azuma exclaimed in surprise before nodding. "Well, I get what you're saying, but don't you have someone in your mind where you go *'Ah, if it's a competition of who's the prettiest, I'd have this girl represent Class B!'* or something?"

"Ohh, that's a nice way of putting it, Sana."

There's no escaping now, huh?

"Hmm... If we look at it from that perspective... then the safest option would be... Matsushita, I guess."

I mirrored their opinions, but those were also my honest thoughts. In a competition where judges are involved, Matsushita might yield the most desirable results. Though if it were a poll, Kikyuu would have a better chance.

They looked at each other with a simple *"I guess it's her, after all."* while shrugging.

The three of us hung out after lunch until we split up at around two o'clock. I went back to my room and found one person rummaging over his luggage.

"Ayanokouji-kun, what's up?" asked Hirata.

"I'm just planning to relax for the rest of the afternoon. How



about you?"

"I'm trying to find my keychain..."

"Ah, that. Was it from Karuizawa or something?"

"Spot on. How'd you guess?"

Who else would give you heart-bedazzled presents...?

*"The class prince is on his way to tend to the tyrant princess' needs!"*,  
as the saying goes in Class B.

Hirata tried to invite me, but I declined, saying that I wanted to lay down for a bit.

It's good that Kouenji's not around. I can be alone with my own thoughts and maybe fall asleep while I'm at it.

So much has happened in these past three days... The learning curve for social interactions-- it's all messed up for someone like me.

While thinking about those things, my phone rang with Kikyou's name displayed on the caller ID.

"Kikyou?"

*"Kiyotaka-kun? Are you still inside your room right now?"*

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

*"I asked Hirata-kun when I saw him earlier. Is it alright if I go there?"*

Ahh, it's been a while since her last venting session, after all.

"Are you sure? Kouenji and Yukimura might come back, you know?"

*"Ah, it's fine. Apparently, Kouenji-kun is exercising in the gym. And Yukimura-kun is hanging out with Minami-kun and Okitani-kun."*

"I guess I should've expected you to know already."

*"Ahaha, my friends just happened to know when I asked them. It's not a big deal."*

Kikyou's social connections were really something.

It wasn't long before she arrived in our room.

She had some complaints about our classmates, but other than that, her stories were positive for the most part. We chatted about the usual stuff and hung out like normal.

I thought things would stay that way until...

*\*Bzzt\**

Our phones violently vibrated while emitting a very loud sound. They rang at the same time with a ringtone that's unique to messages sent by the school. They were usually used for events where students receive news about sudden changes or new instructions. Even if your phone was on silent, it would still make a sound, indicating that the message was of high importance.

"What is it, all of a sudden...?" Kikyou grabbed her phone with a vigilant expression.

We were both confused since this was the first time in our entire summer vacation that they used it. As we took out our phones, an



announcement could be heard throughout the ship.

*"Attention, This is an announcement to all students. All students should have received a message from the school, as indicated in the contact line. Please check your individual mobile devices and follow the instructions accordingly. In the event that you did not receive a message, we apologize for the inconvenience. Please go to the nearest faculty member for assistance. Because the contents of the message are extremely important, please do not miss it. I repeat--"*

The two of us glanced at each other before checking our messages.

*[A special test will begin soon. Please gather in the designated room at the designated time. Anyone who arrives later than ten minutes after the start time may be penalized. Please gather in Room 202 on the deck by 20:40 today. Because it takes about twenty minutes to reach the area, we ask that you please use the restrooms now, if necessary. Either silence your phone or turn it off and please wear your uniforms as you make your way over.]*

A special test, huh? Would you look at that? It seems like we didn't have to wait long.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*The illustrations are tentative. If they ever get one in the canon, I'll obviously edit them out. I just wanted everyone to have an easier time imagining what they look like since I'm giving them some screen time.*

*- Suzune illust. by **Yuyu Ichino**-sensei.*

*- Azuma Sana tentative illust. by **dnwls3010** (on Twitter).*

*- Ichihashi Ruri tentative illust by **kagachi\_SK** (on Twitter).*

*Consider following them because their art is \*Chef's Kiss\*.*

*Sana's academic excellence is canon.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 2.1 - The Players on the Board

"Can you lend me your phone for a bit, Kikyou?" I asked.

"Mn, sure." Kikyou handed her phone over without hesitation.

She leaned closer until the sides of our heads and shoulders touched. I compared and contrasted the messages that we got while she looked over beside me.

"They're completely the same..." I muttered. "Kikyou, ask everyone in the group chat to send their room number and time."

Did all of us get the same message? That's impossible, though. One of the simple cabins on the 2nd deck can't occupy an entire class let alone the entirety of the freshmen.

"O-Okay, I understand." Kikyou tensed up after I started giving out instructions.

The two of us sent our time and room number in a simple format that everyone can follow.

One by one, messages started flooding the group chat.

It took about 7 minutes before everyone (except Kouenji, who wasn't part of the class group chat) in the classes managed to respond.

"Kiyotaka-kun, do you have any idea what this could mean?" asked the confused Kikyou.

"Hmm... Three rooms are used in total-- Room 202 to Room 204. Their times range from 17:00 to 20:40, the same as our time... The rooms differ for each designated time," I muttered.

*17:00 - Room 203*

*17:20 - Room 204*

*17:40 - Room 202*

*18:00 - Room 203*

*18:20 - Room 204*

*18:40 - Room 202*

*19:00 - Room 203*

*19:20 - Room 204*

*19:40 - Room 202*

*20:00 - Room 203*

*20:20 - Room 204*

*20:40 - Room 202*



"Hirata-kun and Horikita-san have the same room and time as us."

"Yeah... It seems like we'll have to meet up together later," I replied before continuing to analyze the data. "Twelve groups in total, huh? There's a twenty-minute margin between each... The 17:00 group, the 17:20 group, the 19:00 group, and us, the 20:40 group all have four members. Every other group has 3 members besides the 19:20 group, so we can probably assume that Kouenji belongs there."

"K-Kiyotaka-kun, please slow down for a bit... I'm sorry, I can barely keep up," Kikyoku commented with a bitter smile.

"It's alright, Kikyoku. I'm just doing some pre-analysis while speaking to myself. Unless we fully get the context and instructions, what I'm saying might end up being completely irrelevant. You don't really have to pay attention."

"Hee-hee. Knowing you, I'm sure that won't be the case." Kikyoku chuckled adorably.

"You overestimate me," I responded with my usual line.

"I'm not~, " she replied with an unwavering smile.

With her puppy-like eyes, I was compelled to gently pat Kikyoku's head. She seemed pleased by it, so I guess it's fine.

"Well, for starters, we'll ask the 17:00 group to report their findings after their turn."

"Ohh, let's see... Sakura-san, Matsushita-san, Sudou-kun, and... Kanji-kun, I guess."

"Yeah," I nodded before checking the time. "It's 4:21 PM now, 39 minutes before the designated time. We were given 20 minutes to travel down to the 2nd deck, so they have more than enough time to change into their uniforms before doing so."

"Should we ask each group to make their own group chats?"

"Hmm, that's a good point... But I don't think it's necessary right now. We'll hold on to that idea until the meetings are over. Is that alright?"

"Sure~!"

A lot of the group chats that I belong to were slowly getting active. I sent some instructions to Hirata as Kikyoku stood up and prepared to leave.

"I'll be going on ahead, Kiyotaka-kun. My friends are probably a bit confused about the situation. I'll tell them that you have a plan. That should ease their minds."

"I don't really have a plan yet, but go for it, I guess," I replied with a shrug. "Regardless of what this exam is about, I'd end up having to think of something, anyway."

Kikyoku nodded before giving me a meaningful smile.

"Be sure to tell me about your lunch date with Azuma-san and



Ichihashi-san in Blue Ocean next time, okay? Bye-bye~!"

"Ah--"

She gently closed the door before I could give a response.

Blue Ocean was the name of the cafe that the two girls invited me to during lunch. Was Kikyuu mad that I didn't mention what happened voluntarily...? I just forgot about it, though...

*(4:22 PM) [Everyone, we'll be reserving a lounge suite on the 1st deck so our class can have a meeting. Please come when you're available. We'll be there until 7:00 PM.] (Hirata)*

The luxurious lounges on the 9th deck are bigger and cozier, but the smaller lounges on the 1st deck were the optimal choices this time, mainly due to their accessibility. It wouldn't take more than 10 minutes to walk from one of the suites to the elevator going to the 2nd deck.

To be honest, I still don't have any idea as to what this new special exam is going to be about. However, it's safe to assume that the rules and instructions would be about as complicated as the island exam.

*"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun? I expected your call."*

"Of course, you did."

*"Yep~! After all, I'm the only one that you can rely on, right? Don't worry. I'll make sure to pay attention."*

She's right. Ken and Ike are out of the question, and I can't really ask Airi to do it since the pressure might be too much for her. Matsushita must've understood everything after seeing the names of her groupmates.

"I'll be counting on you, then."

*"Sure thing! But you owe me one, okay~?"*

"Alright, gotcha. Thanks, Matsushita."

I hung up before changing my clothes. It didn't take long until Yukimura arrived. He asked me about my opinions on this sudden test and I calmly told him that all we could do right now was wait for the real instructions. He agreed with a somber expression.

Ichinose sent me a message asking about how our end is doing. Like Class B, Class C also intended to have a meeting on deck one.

I wonder how the emails they received differ from ours? Her message didn't contain any useful information indicating that she had no intention of disclosing any designated time or room assigned for her class.

*(4:29) [We need more information before deciding to fully cooperate.] (Ichinose)*

*(4:29) [Of course. Being vigilant is still the best course of action.] (Ayanokouji)*



Day 0, 5:23 PM.

"Hey~." Matsushita opened the door with Ike, Airi, and Ken following behind her.

"Matsushita-san, you're here." Hirata received them with a smile. "Did you see our classmates from the second group? They left a little over 10 minutes ago."

"Yes. We passed by Hasebe-san and the others earlier. The meeting ended in 15 minutes, so the groups that would follow the previous ones are given a five-minute window to get there. They should be fine," she said.

"What did you find out about the exam?" asked Horikita.

The other three sat beside their respective friend groups. Matsushita must've already told them that she'll be the one who'd do the explaining.

"Alright... I'll try my best to give you a rundown. But, please consider this as a heads-up only. It would still be best for everyone to pay attention when it's their turn for the meeting." Matsushita gently reminded us. "The school honestly made them overcomplicated."

After firmly receiving everyone's attention, Matsushita started explaining the contents of the exam.

After discussing the main ideas along with the succeeding groups, 7:00 PM arrived in a flash. Only four people remained inside the lounge-- Hirata, Horikita, Kikyou, and me. Since no one was scheduled to occupy the place after us, we were allowed to extend our stay until around 8:30 PM.

"I think we should go ahead and proceed to the 2nd deck now," suggested Hirata.

"Yes, it seems like we'll meet some interesting people there," followed Horikita.

Our group boarded the elevator and arrived on the second deck. There were a little over ten people hanging around. Most of them weren't members of the 20:40 group, however-- like Class A's Moriyou or Class C's Tokitou.

Looking ahead, we could see the people of Class A waiting out in the hallway.

"You've arrived, Class B." Katsuragi Kouhei greeted us with his usual stern expression.

According to Kikyou, Katsuragi was a star student. He boasted excellent grades in his previous schools and even graduated as the student council president in junior high. His place in Class A certainly wasn't unfounded and his calm demeanor wasn't just an act.

His abilities were cleanly showcased with how effectively he led



Class A during the island exam. If it weren't for Hashimoto's betrayal, Class A would've won by a considerable margin.

Right now, he seems to be leading his group of four. And from the looks of it, his reputation in Class A still remained intact... but a lot more brittle. It's like cracked glass. Even the smallest of impacts would completely shatter it to pieces.

I waited for a split second before sensing that none of my groupmates planned to respond.

"It seems like we'll be in the same group, Katsuragi," I replied.

"Let's not act dumb, Ayanokouji. I'm sure you've figured it out after collecting information from your classmates." Katsuragi calmly deflected my words.

"It seems like you're thinking quite highly of me."

"Of course. After your victory on the island, it only makes sense." Katsuragi's words contained praise but the way he delivered them sounded like he was picking a fight.

"Oya~? If it isn't Katsuragi-kun and Ayanokouji-kun~!"

The representatives of Class C finally arrived. Their leader, Ichinose Honami, immediately greeted my groupmates with a smile.

"We meet again, Ayanokouji, Horikita," said Kanzaki. "It's rare for you to be the aggressor in a conflict, Katsuragi."

The other Class C student was a girl named Tsube Hitomi.

"There are no conflicts here. Don't delude yourself, Kanzaki," Katsuragi bit back, staying composed.

As the number of students increased, the atmosphere became a lot tenser.

"Kukuku. It seems like I'm late to the party."

Of course, the remaining participants for Class D arrived in such a fashion. After all, they were being led by none other than Ryuen Kakeru.

"Ryuen." Katsuragi gave him a sharp look.

"How are you doing Katsuragi? Have you recovered yet?" he asked with a smirk.

"Recover? Shouldn't I be the one asking you that?" Katsuragi replied with his arms crossed.

"Kuku. Just asking. After all, my poisoned stomach and Ayanokouji's head injury are nothing compared to the shame of being completely played by both the former Class D and the current Class D."

Ryuen laughed along with his two groupmates.

The students behind Katsuragi were visibly displeased. Only the man himself stayed cool even after receiving Ryuen's insults.

The bad blood between Class A and D's leaders is apparent. I wonder how this is going to turn out?



## Vol. 4: Chapter 2.2 - The Zodiac Test

"Hmm. Having a pointless discourse right now wouldn't be ideal. We'll be going on ahead." Katsuragi and his classmates entered Room 201 as soon as the clock hit 8:40 PM.

"We'll be going on ahead, too. See you later~." Ichinose smilingly exchanged goodbyes with Kikyuu before going inside their assigned room, Room 203.

"Heh. Let's have some fun, Ayanokouji," said Ryuuken as he glared at me with his baleful grin.

Unlike Katsuragi, who looked like he paraded with his allies, Ryuuken's entourage resembled that of lackeys following their boss. He opened the door and entered Room 204.

"Well then, shall we go ahead and enter the room?" Horikita, who remained unperturbed this whole time, took the initiative and entered Room 202.

Apparently, there were four rooms used in total. It was easy to deduce the reason why none of our groups got assigned to Room 201: Our own class adviser, Chabashira-sensei, was appointed to that room.

"Heya~!" Hoshinomiya-sensei, the homeroom teacher and class adviser of Ichinose's Class C will be the one who'd do the briefing for us. "Ohh... What an amazing lineup from Class B. Sae-chan really went all-out on this one.

Four somewhat disordered chairs were reserved for us.

"Well, well, for now, please take your seats. I'm sure you already know what this test is going to be about, but for the sake of formality, I will still be explaining everything." Hoshinomiya-sensei winked in reassurance. "Don't worry, I'll make it fast."

We sat and stayed silent, waiting for her to speak.

"So, in this special test, all first-year students will be divided into twelve groups based on the twelve Chinese Zodiac Signs. Participation is a must for everyone, with the exception of Sakayanagi-chan, of course." Hoshinomiya-sensei started explaining as she raised her index finger. "*What's the point of this test?*", you may be asking. Well, society needs three fundamental qualities in order to progress, and those three are action, thinking, and teamwork. Having those three will bump up your success in becoming wonderful adults!"



Matsushita and the others have already explained this introduction. Despite that, the four of us still listened intently.

"It's pretty obvious that your previous special exam focused on testing your *"teamwork"*. That's why the theme was *'freedom'*, correct? This time, the school wants to test your *"thinking"* with the theme being *'prudence'*." Hoshinomiya-sensei eyed us with a grin, displaying four of her fingers. "With that said, we will test your thinking in four ways. First is your ability to thoroughly process information, which is an essential component of this test. Next is your ability to analyze the current situation and clarify the task at hand. Then, it'll be your ability to solve the problem after you've clarified the process and identified the task. Lastly, we'll test your ability to utilize your imagination, and the ability to create new values. Those four will help shape up your thinking."

Hoshinomiya-sensei ended with a short sigh.

"Well, any questions?"

"Sensei." Horikita raised her hand.

"Oh, we got someone~! Yes, Horikita-san?" Hoshinomiya-sensei cheerfully called to her.

"I understand that our class had to be divided into twelve groups, but wouldn't it be more efficient to meet each Zodiac group with all of its members?"

"Humu, humu. That's the popular question, as usual." Expecting Horikita's query, Hoshinomiya-sensei responded with an understanding nod. "I see the point in that concern. In fact, briefing the entirety of the first years would've been possible, too. However, do you remember the reactions of your classmates when the first or second groups explained the mechanics of this test?"

There's was no way for her to know that Class B met up with each other, but I guess for Hoshinomiya-sensei, who knew about our class's similarities with hers, it was a pretty safe assumption to make.

"They were shocked and confused," answered Kikyou.

"Exactly~!" Hoshinomiya-sensei pointed at her with a smile. "You're right, Kushida-chan. You see, each group is composed of three to four students from different classes. If you were all gathered in one place, announcing the mixed-class concept would create chaos. We then took the same concern with grouping you up on the briefing."

Hoshinomiya-sensei explained everything with absolute consistency and fluidity.

"If that's your only question, then let's go ahead and get into the specifics." Hoshinomiya-sensei grabbed a laminated postcard-sized piece of paper. "Your group assignment is *"Dragon"*. Printed on that



paper is a list of the members. If you think it's necessary, then memorizing them now would be a good idea."

The four of us carefully scanned the list. The group name was written in Japanese placed in parentheses next to the Chinese reading. Below were the names of all the fourteen members of the group.

*Class A: Katsuragi Kouhei, Nishikawa Ryouko, Matoba Shinji, Yano Koharu*

*Class B: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Kushida Kikyou, Hirata Yousuke, Horikita Suzune*

*Class C: Ichinose Honami, Kanzaki Ryuuji, Tsube Hitomi*

*Class D: Suzuki Hidetoshi, Sonoda Masashi, Ryuuken Kakeru*

"I'm sure it won't be easy for any of you to mingle with students from other classes, but if you work together and get along, good results are waiting for you~!" Hoshinomiya-sensei said with a not-so reassuring thumbs-up. "As you might already know, four possible outcomes can be achieved in this special test. We've prepared the handouts containing those outcomes along with the instructions, rules, and reminders."

We returned the members list in exchange for those handouts. However, Hoshinomiya-sensei gently warned us before letting go.

"Ah, taking these out nor photographing them is forbidden, okay~? You can only verify the contents right here and now."

She handed some slightly crumpled sheets of paper. Their suboptimal state meant that these were the same sheets of paper used by the students before us. The rules were written as followed:

## **AN EXPLANATION OF THE SUMMER GROUP SPECIAL EXAMINATION**

*The assignment centers on a "VIP" assigned to each group. By providing answers to the school via a defined method, you will earn one of the four outcomes.*

*At 8:00 AM on the first day of the test, each student will simultaneously receive a message informing you that we have chosen someone to be the "VIP" in your group.*

*The test begins tomorrow and ends at 9:00 PM on the fourth day.*

*Each group should gather twice during the day at a predetermined time in a predetermined room to talk for one hour, so they may discuss matters with only their group.*

*The contents of each group's discussion shall be left to the discretion of the group itself.*

*After the test has concluded, the school will only accept answers during the period between 9:30 PM and 10:00 PM on that final night. During that time, each group must submit their answer regarding who*



they think the "VIP" is. Each individual may only submit an answer once, but only the first answer received from any member of a group will decide the test results for that group.

Answers must be sent only to an email address that we shall provide to each group, and only using your mobile devices.

The twelve VIPs cannot submit answers.

You may only submit an answer for the group to which you are assigned.

Test results will be sent to all students via email at 11:00 PM on the final day.

A list of fundamental rules was written on the paper. More detailed descriptions of the rules and a list of prohibited items were also on the sheet. The terms were stricter than the terms for the test on the uninhabited island, with many more precautions.

One of them caught my attention:

*Memorandum Restriction:*

- Memorandums signed on or after August 8th of the school year are restricted for this exam. For further details, please ask your class adviser.

- Memorandums signed before August 8th of the school year can be used.

- The rules and instructions will override all contractual conditions.

Given the nature of this exam, I guess it makes sense. After the rules, I saw the four potential "outcomes":

**OUTCOME #1:** If the answer submitted by the group after 9:30 PM on the final day is correct, then everyone in the group will receive private points, including those of the VIP's classmates who belong to the group.

**OUTCOME #2:** If a group fails to submit an answer between 9:30 PM and 10:00 PM on the final day, or if someone from the group other than the VIP and their classmates submits an incorrect answer, then the VIP will be awarded 500,000 private points.

"The value isn't specified in Outcome #1, but it's also 500,000 private points, right, Sensei?" asked Hirata.

"Yes. 500,000 private points will be the base reward for each outcome. And for the VIP, the greatest thing about Outcome #1 would be his or her double rewards," she replied.

Matsushita and the others have explained this bit earlier. The reactions of our classmates were... wild, to say the least. It was especially true for those who are running low on money.

In other words, every member will receive 500,000 private points and the VIP will receive 1,000,000 private points. Compared to the number of private points we've been collecting until now, it's a disgustingly large amount.



"I assume you've understood everything thus far, yes?"

The four of us nodded in response.

As we discussed during the class meeting earlier, the first two outcomes were severely biased towards the chosen VIP. If those two were the only outcomes, being chosen as the VIP would automatically make you a winner. At that point, the test wouldn't even be valid given how unnecessary the act of "*thinking*" will be.

"Then, you can go ahead and turn the paper around," she instructed.

Once we flipped the paper, the last two game-changing outcomes were finally visible before our eyes.

*OUTCOME #3: This outcome is triggered when someone other than the VIP gives the correct answer to the school without waiting until 9:30 PM on the final day of the exam. That student's class will gain 50 class points, and the person who submitted the correct answer will earn 500,000 private points. Also, the VIP's class will lose 50 class points as a penalty. At that point, the group's testing period will come to an end. However, if one of the VIP's classmates is the person who submits the correct answer, this answer will not be counted and the test will continue.*

*OUTCOME #4: This outcome is triggered when someone other than the VIP gives the incorrect answer to the school without waiting until 9:30 PM on the final day of the exam. That student's class will lose 50 class points. The VIP will earn 500,000 private points, and the VIP's class will earn 50 class points. The testing period will end for the group that submitted the incorrect answer. However, if one of the VIP's classmates is the person who submits the incorrect answer, this answer will not be counted and the test will continue.*

"The test may have looked like a lottery at first, but these last two outcomes cement its true concept," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"A Social Deduction game," muttered Horikita.

Social Deduction games are games in which the players' goal is to expose the hidden roles of opposing players. They are generally sorted into "*good*" and "*evil*" roles with opposite objectives. The very first social deduction game was "*Mafia*" which was created around 1987. A decade later, another social deduction game called "*Werewolf*" was created.

According to our classmates, Werewolf was the game that our teachers used as an example.

The rules of the game were fairly simple. The players were divided into two groups. The good group is the "*Villagers*" group while the evil group is the "*Wolves*" group, with "*day*" and "*night*" as the time segments for each action.

The game's premise says that werewolves are living amongst the



villagers, preying on them every night. The villagers must eliminate the werewolves (via hanging) to restore peace to the village. Meanwhile, the wolves, although outnumbered, can hide their identities during the day and strike freely during the night.

If we get into technical terms, the game starts with players obtaining their roles from the Game Master. During the first night, the Wolves can eliminate one of the Villagers while they are "*asleep*". When the next day comes around, a votation can be conducted after the players discuss the matters about the murder. Then, the player who gets suspected the most would most likely garner the biggest number of votes and be "*hanged*". The Wolves win if they eliminate enough Villagers while the Villagers win if they expose all Wolves and get them hanged.

It's easy to see the parallels between that game and this special exam if we remove the concept of good and evil. The Administrators are the Game Masters, the VIPs are the Wolves, and the remaining students are the Villagers.

However, discovering the identities of the VIPs and turning traitor might cause some social issues. After all, this exam wasn't just a simple game.

"The rewards and penalties look pretty intense, right~? But-! You don't have to worry about it. The school has taken anonymity into account for this test. After the exam ends, only the outcomes for each group and the change in class points and private points will be announced. The names of the VIPs and the ones who submitted answers will stay hidden. If you're really shy about receiving your points, you can request a temporary ID and transfer them there. Dividing the points and receiving them periodically is also an option." Hoshinomiya-sensei smiled while stating the other method. "Of course, you're also free to receive everything openly."

The school really doesn't cut corners, huh? With that mechanic, the VIP or anyone colluding with him or her won't have to worry about the social consequences of lying. This makes finding the VIP an exceptionally harder feat.

"Okay~! Now that everything's said and done, I'll give my final set of reminders. Please, don't forget to go to your designated room starting tomorrow. Your group will meet two times a day: 1:00 PM and 8:00 PM. Remember, the discussion will last an hour and you can't leave the room. Of course, once the whole hour has passed, you are free to stay or go. However, in the event that you feel ill or can't endure it any longer, please contact your homeroom teacher immediately and make a request." Hoshinomiya-sensei pressed her palms together with a gentle smile.

"The VIPs' identities are crucial in this exam. Are there any



criteria on how they're going to be chosen?" asked Horikita.

"Hmm. Well, obviously, we will consider some elements before choosing the VIPs, but the specifics are, of course, confidential," she answered.

"I see..." Horikita held her chin, pondering.

"Don't worry about it, Horikita-san. The school is committed to fairness. I can assure you that. We will be unconditionally strict and impartial with regard to the rules and mechanics. Once the VIPs are chosen, we will not accept any request for changes even if the VIPs themselves didn't want the role. In addition, copying, deleting, transferring, or modifying emails sent from the school is prohibited. It's all in the rules, remember?"

The punishment for breaking any of these rules is a lot more severe. Even the smallest of attempts may cause a student to get expelled.

"Alright~! The meeting is over! Be sure to participate in the self-introduction tomorrow!"

We left the room feeling puzzled and complicated.

Once you put everything into consideration, it really was just a simple social deduction game. However, a lot of overly formal text, redundancies, and a severely inefficient briefing schedule made everything a lot more confusing.

So this is what Matsushita was talking about when she said "*overcomplication*". When she and everyone else explained the mechanics of the exam, everything sounded much more direct, probably because they only conveyed the main points.

"Horikita-san, why did you ask that question earlier?" Hirata must've been talking about the time when she asked why the groups were briefed separately.

"I was wondering about that, too. Didn't our classmates give us the answer to that already?" added Kikyou.

Of course, Matsushita and the others have taken that question into account. However, the answers they got was just the same as the one that we got.

Horikita turned to me with a dubious stare.

"I thought Ayanokouji-kun might infer something from Hoshinomiya-sensei's reaction." Horikita shifted the attention to me.

"Hah? You did that just because you wanted me to get a read on her? Do you think I'm an esper or something?" I whined with a shrug.

She skeptically narrowed her eyes before looking away with a "*hmph*".

Jokes aside, Horikita was on point. Her question gave me the best



possible attempt to analyze Hoshinomiya-sensei's behavioral responses. It's just that she didn't show any openings whatsoever.

Regardless, Horikita took an action that I didn't even consider doing. Color me impressed.

"Well, for now, why don't we grab dinner? We can talk about the strategies while we're at it." Hirata seamlessly transformed the casual conversation into a dinner invitation.

"Ah, sorry. I made plans with my friends tonight. I'll join you guys next time." I politely declined his offer.

"I don't think we can come up with anything satisfactory without you there. If you're not coming, then I'll pass, too." Horikita turned down the offer using my absence as an excuse.

"That's fine, but I think it's a good idea to set up a quick meeting tomorrow. We can talk about the details in the group chat. Is that alright?" Despite getting refused, Hirata effortlessly turned things around by suggesting another meet-up at a later date.

"That's okay with me! I have plans with my friends, too, anyway," replied Kikyou.

After we separated, I met up with my friends from the Ayanokouji Group. We had our dinner at a fancy restaurant and left with sated appetites.

When I got back to my room, Yukimura was already asleep and Kouenji was admiring himself in front of the mirror. It seems like Hirata was still out, so I had no choice but to mind my own business while ignoring Kouenji's illustrious presence.

I opened my phone and observed the members' lists.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*The list of prohibited items wasn't specified. So my addition of the Memorandum Restriction is new. I did this to prevent boring deals between the characters.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 3.1 - The VIP in Sheep's Clothing

Day 1, 7:30 AM.

The four of us were currently inside one of the lounges on the first deck.

"I want to talk about Kouenji-kun," said Hirata.

We've briefly discussed the things we wanted to talk about last night. The problem regarding Kouenji was definitely one of them. I mean, it was only a matter of time.

"Given his attitude, I doubt he'd cooperate with us," followed Horikita.

"Is there no way for us to convince him?" asked Kikyou.

"Kouenji-kun's actions have been irresponsible and neglectful. At first, I thought it was fine to let him be. Even if he didn't take things seriously, I anticipated that there wouldn't be any huge demerit for the class. However, not participating at all turned out to be a problem, especially during special tests," said Horikita.

"It caused quite a bit of trouble during the island exam..." muttered Hirata.

"Hmm... At first glance, I don't think he can do anything to harm the class this time. If he refrains from participating in the discussions, only he will get penalized. However..." I glanced at Horikita, anticipating that she knew what I'm going to say next.

"Outcome #4, right?" Horikita continued with a grave expression.

"Yeah," I nodded. "If Kouenji really wanted to force himself out, he can just submit an answer randomly. His group's exam will end but we'll have to suffer greatly."

"Not only that... If the VIP happened to be from Class A, the gap between us would only widen," added Hirata.

This exam wasn't like the one on the island where we had to find the leaders' names while protecting ours. In this exam, deceiving other classes was actually the ideal strategy if the VIP is from your class. After all, unlike last time where there weren't any inside benefits in misleading the enemies, this time, we'll gain both private points and class points.

"But what if Kouenji-kun is the VIP? He can't submit an answer that way, right? And with a chance to get 500,000 private points, I



don't think he'll reveal himself that easily," asked Kikyou.

"I think we can count on it to some degree, but he's too unpredictable. Who's to say that he won't prioritize his relaxation time over 500,000 private points?" I argued.

"You're right... That's still a pretty big possibility." Kikyou agreed with a concerned expression.

"I'll go talk to him." Hirata made his decision with a firm look on his face.

"We'll be counting on you then," I nodded, giving my support.

To be honest, as much as I trust Hirata's resolve, I didn't have hope for a favorable result.

After talking about Kouenji, we ran through the rules and mechanics, making sure that we understood everything perfectly.

The testing period lasted three days, or four if we include the third day which is a rest day. After all, even if there weren't going to be any discussions, students were free to submit answers if they wanted.

We then tried to memorize the most vital prohibitions. One of which prevented the cooperation between all first-years:

*Discussion between students hailing from different classes is forbidden if they are not in the same group. This lasts until the exam ends. Breaking that rule and getting caught would result in expulsion.*

The details were specified in the manual and it seemed like small conversations are fine. We were being heavily monitored so I doubt students could get away with having hour-long discussions with students they're not supposed to talk with.

The rest of the rules were just as tight. Forceful methods like stealing someone else's phone, threats, or acts of violence will automatically get you expelled. They were on the same severity as the island exam's rules if not harsher.

We tried to simplify the given tangible methods to clear the test.

*Outcome #1: The VIP reveals his or her identity and the other students in the group submit their answers in the designated timeframe. Everyone gets their reward and the exam is cleared.*

*Outcome #2: The VIP stays hidden until the end.*

*Outcome #3: The traitor finds out the VIP's identity and submits the right answer.*

*Outcome #4: The traitor is misled about the VIP's identity and submits the wrong answer.*

The first outcome is good for one individual only. The class with four students also has the advantage. They'd get 2,000,000 private points or 2,500,000 if one of them is the VIP.

The second outcome is a viable option if the enemies are hard to trick. However, it's also up to the VIP's abilities to keep up a poker



face and avoid suspicion.

If the VIP is from our class, the third outcome must be avoided at all times.

On the other hand, we win if the traitor is misled about our VIP's identity and triggers the fourth outcome.

The test was truly about thinking. In a social deduction game, players are forced to lie and deceive others. It was both the most effective strategy and the best way to have fun. However, this exam was quite different. A lot of strange things are certainly getting looked over and I'm sure that those strange things will be the key to winning.

Before we could finish up, the time for the VIPs' assignments finally arrived.

Our phones made loud beeps all at the same time. The four of us immediately checked the emails we received.

"After thorough consideration, you have not been chosen to be the VIP. Please remember to be a team player as your group tackles the challenges of this test. The exam begins today and will be held over a period of three days. Members of the Dragon group should gather in the Dragon Room located on the second deck." Hirata narrated the message that he got.

I received the exam the exact same one, word for word. Horikita and I glanced towards each other at the same time. Her weak nod indicated that she got the same message, too. The three of us looked in Kikyō's direction.

She continued staring at her phone with a stiff expression.

"Uhm... It seems like... I was chosen as the VIP for our group." Kikyō nervously held her phone screen to us.

The email she received became very easy for us to read.

*[After thorough consideration, you have been chosen to be the VIP. Please remember to be a team player as your group tackles the challenges of this test. The exam begins today and will be held over a period of three days. Members of the Dragon group should gather in the Dragon Room located on the second deck.]*

I reread the first sentence a couple of times just to make sure that I wasn't seeing things incorrectly. The absence of the word "not" made her message flip entirely on its head.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 3.2 - I'll Win

Two more messages were sent to me after a brief moment.

(8:01) *[Ayanokouji, I'm the VIP in our group.]*

(8:01) *[Ayanokouji-kun, I'm the VIP.]*

As instructed, any VIP from our class will immediately send me a text.

"How many others?" asked Horikita.

"Two-- Karuizawa from the Rabbit Group and Minami from the Horse Group," I replied.

"I see. That further strengthens our theory then," said Horikita.

"-That there are three VIPs in each class, right?" asked Kikyō.

Hoshinomiya-sensei stressed it near the end of our briefing. The school will be fair and impartial. The equal number of VIPs across each class made sense.

"Yeah," nodded Hirata. "We can't really help out our classmates too much, so our main priority is to hide your identity, Kushida-san."

Once our classmates meet up with their groups, our movements are limited. Of course, the option of eavesdropping on them via call is possible, but I'm sure we'll be preoccupied with our own groups' matters.

"Yes. For the nine remaining groups, I believe we need more time to figure out what's happening, before making any moves."

The four of us were fairly confident that a pattern or code exists. After all, Hoshinomiya-sensei explicitly stated that they will *"consider some elements"* before choosing the VIPs. It's the perfect scenario to really test our cognitive thinking. On the other hand, engaging in discussions will test our abilities in psychological warfare.

Now that we have three VIP names, cracking the code will be significantly easier.

Horikita and I decided to have lunch in a yakitori-ya on the first deck. It seems like she wanted to talk about the test. It's open as a restaurant during the day, but since the place still serves alcohol, it's off-limits to students during the night.

It's inconspicuous, to say the least. We're the only ones inside, so our conversation would normally be very audible to others, but the music was loud enough to drown out our voices. We weren't too



worried about someone else coming. And besides, even if an eavesdropper wanted to sneak in, they'll instantly be seen by both of us the moment they reach the entrance.

"Now this is quite the secret meeting," I commented while waiting for our orders.

"Quite frankly, I wanted to feel the summer breeze back on the upper decks. However, this is a special exam. Anything that would give us an edge must be exclusive to our class," sighed Horikita.

Having a meeting in a place like this basically had zero risks so we didn't need to hold back in talking about potential strategies. Of course, once this location gets known to our rivals, it'd be extremely dangerous.

"Why didn't you invite Hirata and Kikyou?" I asked.

"I wanted to discuss everything with you first," replied Horikita.

"I see." After a quick sigh, I looked at Horikita with a serious expression. "There's a big chance that we'll become Class A after this, you know?"

"Yes, of course. That's why I'll do everything to win." Horikita's usual calm was still present, but her eyes exhibited a different kind of vibrance.

"Do you think your brother will recognize you after we get there?" I asked in an offhanded manner.

Inevitably, Horikita's composure took a hit.

"I don't know..." Knowing that I didn't have any malicious intent behind my question, Horikita chose to tackle it in an objective manner. Well, at least she tried to.

"He's the student council president, Horikita. I doubt he'd be in the dark about whatever happens in our special exams."

"Which means he'll know exactly who runs the show... right?"

"Yeah. With the way things are right now, you're nothing but my pawn," I said so without even looking at her.

I uttered cold and harsh words, but they were also truths that she couldn't deny. Horikita didn't get angry. Instead, she had a look of frustration.

"I... I admit that I wasn't the most useful person during our previous exam, but that won't be the case this time. I'll do everything I can..." she replied with a strained voice.

The Deserted Island Special Exam, as I like to call it... That environment wasn't for an honor student like Horikita. However, this test might be her chance to shine.

"Well then, why don't we use this opportunity to see a preview of Class A's future leader?" I crossed my arms and leaned back. "Of course, I'll help you, but only in the smallest way possible."

Horikita didn't look too surprised. She probably understood my



implications right from the start.

"I see... You want me to take the lead."

"Yeah. I'll be your pawn this time, but you have to bring our class to victory. Can you do it?"

"Of course, I can." Horikita nodded with unyielding determination in her eyes. "Leave it to me, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Against Katsuragi, Ichinose, and Ryuen... Do you think you'll win?" I asked.

"I'll win," Horikita answered bluntly.

Day 1, 12:45 PM.

Horikita and I made our way to the 2nd deck. I recalled our meeting from earlier and etched the details in my mind.

*"We may have three VIPs right now. But they won't be enough, even if a pattern really exists," I said.*

*"You're right. We have to search for clues," she replied.*

*"Well, the clues were already given to us, right?"*

*Horikita nodded in agreement before getting specific.*

*"First of all, didn't you find the wording of the email quite strange?"*

*"Ohh, you mean the one we got when the VIPs were assigned."*

*"I didn't like it. It's like they were saying I wasn't qualified to be the VIP."*

*How competitive. I bet she and Ibuki would get along.*

*"Do you think it's a clue?" I asked.*

*"Definitely," Horikita replied without batting an eyelid.*

*"I see."*

*"Next up was how we were grouped. The Dragon Group being the last one to be briefed and the Class Representatives being its members-- it's definitely another clue."*

*I nodded silently.*

*"I think you're on the right track, but even if we line up every clue, we won't see the pattern unless we get our hands on---..." I stopped myself before asking. "Horikita, how many VIP names do we need to figure it out?"*

*"What a coincidence. I was about to ask you the same thing."*

*"I don't know," I shook my head.*

*"Is that really the case?" Horikita probed me with doubtful eyes.*

*"I've answered a lot of puzzles in the past, but I never really paid attention to my own methods. As long as I see the pattern, I answer. That's all there is to it."*

*"I see," Horikita sighed in defeat. Even if I didn't tell her the truth, prying further won't help. She knew that all too well. "If we get 50% of*



*the required variables, I'm sure the pattern will become clear. So at least three other names are needed to figure everything out. If we use all of the hidden clues, then maybe two are enough."*

*"Three, huh?"*

*"I've made a spreadsheet of all the groupings. Here, I'll send it to you."*

*"Ahh, thanks."*

*"I'll send it to Kushida-san and Hirata-kun, as well."*

*Last night, the class group chat was filled with names after Kikyou asked everyone to send their group members. Horikita made good use of that information.*

While admiring Horikita's abilities in my memories, the two of us finally entered the room labeled *"Dragon"*.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san, hey there~!" Ichinose's cheerful voice greeted us.

She and her classmates were seated on the chairs prepared for us. Along with Class C, Katsuragi's Class A was already settled in, as well.

"Ah, you two are already here."

It wasn't long until Hirata arrived with Kikyou.

"Hello, everyone! Good afternoon." Kikyou made her way beside me and sat closely.

She sat there, smiling, without saying a word. Ichinose, Tsube, and even Class A's Yano and Nishikawa gave us a curious look.

"Oh, seems like the family is complete."

Just before the time hit 1:00 PM, Ryuen and his gang finally showed their faces.

And with their arrival, the first discussion for the Zodiac Test will finally commence.

*Author's Notes:*

*Yakitori-ya: An izakaya specializing in yakitori.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 4.1 - Conference of Dragons

*[The first group discussion begins now.]*

Some of us instinctively glanced towards the loudspeaker inside the room.

"Alright, attention everyone! As the school has instructed us, I think we ought to introduce ourselves to each other. Well, even if we weren't told to do so, I would've suggested this, regardless. Since we'll have two group discussions every day, it would be great if I can learn everyone's names," said Ichinose.

She acted in an instant. It was the type of move that Ichinose Honami would do like it was natural for her. And since Ichinose was surrounded by enemies, volunteering to lead the group should've been drastically more difficult. However, it didn't seem that way to her at all.

The fact she was the first one to act-- In terms of initiative and decisiveness, it seems like Ichinose Honami outclasses Hirata and Kikyuu, the two social elites of Class B.

"I agree. I want to know everyone, as well," replied Hirata.

"I'm the same! If possible, let's all get along," followed Kikyuu.

Speaking just a split second after Ichinose had finished her proposal was expected for both of them. However, while I wasn't too bothered by Ryuu's grin, Katsuragi and his classmates were being strangely quiet.

"Then, I'll go first. I'm Ichinose Honami, from Class C. Nice to meet you, everyone," she said.

"I'm Kanzaki Ryuuji, from Class C."

"My name is Tsube Hitomi, also from Class C!"

The three Class C students were warmly received by Hirata and Kikyuu.

"Nice to meet you." Hirata stood up and took his turn. "I'm Hirata Yousuke, from Class B. I hope we can all get along."

"I'm Kushida Kikyuu, from Class B. I'm pleased to be with everyone here and I'm looking forward to working with you all." Kikyuu, much like Ichinose, introduced herself perfectly.

I nudged Horikita's side with my elbow, telling her to go next. She stood up with little hesitation and introduced herself.



"Horikita Suzune. Class B." And then she sat.

Oi, oi, can you get more mechanical than that?

Here, let me show you how it's done.

"I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, from Class B." And then I sat.

I take it back. We're made from the same junk shop. I'm sorry, Horikita.

Well at least, it wasn't a disaster like my first self-introduction back in April.

After Class C reciprocated our welcome, it was finally Class A and D's turn. We looked at them with different expressions-- mostly curious. But it didn't seem like they had any intention of joining in.

"You guys done playing house?" asked Ryuen. "No? Alright then. Hey, you two, introduce yourselves."

Suzuki and Sonoda stood up with stiff postures.

"I'm Suzuki Hidetoshi, from Class D."

"I'm Sonoda Masashi, from Class D."

They immediately sat afterward. I didn't know if they were embarrassed or scared.

"Nice to meet you, Sonoda-kun, Suzuki-kun." Ichinose acknowledged their introductions with a smile.

"Please look after me during this exam." Kikyou did the same.

"Ryuen-kun, would you like to introduce yourself?" asked Ichinose.

"Kuku. These two are nobodies, so I let them play along with you guys. But what about me? I'm sure my name's known to all of the people in this room. No introductions needed." Ryuen smilingly adjusted his legs and leaned back a bit.

"Well, I can't force anyone to do something they don't wanna do." Ichinose remained unperturbed.

She then turned towards Katsuragi and his class.

"Following Ryuen-kun's reasoning, someone as excellent as you should be known by everyone, too. But would it bother you to introduce yourself, Katsuragi-kun?" she asked.

"It's more likely for the purpose of formality, but I guess there's no harm in following along. It's the school's instruction, after all," he replied.

The Class A students proceeded to introduce themselves. Theirs were a hundred times better than my monotonous blabber, but at least I pulled through.

Ichinose was ultimately chosen to lead the discussion forward.

"Great! Then, as we proceed with the discussions, I have one question. Do all of you think that our group should pursue Outcome #1?" she asked.

"In my opinion, that would be for the best. Our class points may



not move, but everyone gets a share of the reward," replied Hirata.

His answer was great from a neutral standpoint. After all, we had four members.

"Keh, sounds like bullshit to me." Before anyone else could agree, Ryuuen jumped in with a snicker. "Firstly, no one from Class D is the VIP, so I want to find out his or her identity and get Outcome #3. Let's not beat around the bush here and make friends, Ichinose."

"I see. Outcome #3 would definitely benefit the class of the one who turns traitor. In the end, we're still competing here. However, do you have the means to find the VIP, Ryuuen-kun? If your plan was to betray the group, then wouldn't convincing the VIP to get Outcome #1 be a better strategy? Once they reveal themselves, their name is at your mercy." Ichinose responded calmly.

"Kukuku. Resorting to such boring methods in this exam might put me to sleep. If I wanted to find the VIP, I wanted them to know that I was coming. Seeing them struggle to hide might bring me some prime entertainment," chuckled Ryuuen. "But man, you're really a conniving woman, Ichinose. You pose to be an ally of justice, but you're just as much of a sly snake as me."

The deceptive strategy that Ichinose pointed out is rooted in her own proposal of getting Outcome #1. If Ichinose gains the VIP's trust, she could very well become the traitor herself.

"Watch your mouth, Ryuuen," warned Kanzaki.

"It's fine, Kanzaki-kun. What he said isn't without basis." Ichinose faced Ryuuen without trouble. "You can certainly think of it that way, and I won't lie about not wanting Outcome #3. However, I was speaking from your perspective, Ryuuen-kun. Knowing you, I was quite inclined to think you'd go for that strategy."

She's right. Given the innate abilities of the students in this room, everyone should've considered that strategy from the start.

"Well, I don't really care. I'll find the VIP regardless. We can talk if you want. The liar will expose themselves sooner or later," he replied, narrowing his eyes.

"This is absurd. You might just be saying all those things to distract us from the truth. For all we know, the VIP might be hiding behind your back... Or maybe you're the VIP, Ryuuen-kun?" Horikita finally joined the fray.

"Ohoho? Interesting, Suzune. Really interesting. I never expected anyone to believe me, anyway. Then how about it? Why don't you put my name in right now?" Amused, Ryuuen turned to provoke her.

"Do you think anyone would do something that stupid?"

"Hm? Weren't you suspicious of me? I might be the VIP, you know?"



Their conversation started degrading. Horikita sighed vexingly seeing Ryuuen's attempts to mess with her.

"You're wasting your breath on Ryuuen, Horikita. To be honest, I'm more suspicious of Katsuragi and his group." Kanzaki put a brief stop to their verbal bout.

"You can talk amongst yourselves. We, of Class A, aren't interested in having a dialogue." Katsuragi answered without delay.

All of us immediately caught on to what he was trying to say.

"Isn't that a bit unfair, Katsuragi-kun? All of us are contributing in our own ways. If Class A stays silent..." Ichinose tried to reason with him, but Katsuragi already anticipated her response-- like he was waiting for her to say that.

Katsuragi baited her by answering the way he did.

"That's no problem. As I've said, we're not interested in having a dialogue. It's disgraceful for us to selfishly soak up information while saying nothing. To that, our group of four will move away from your area. That way, we won't be able to hear anything and vice versa," replied Katsuragi.

"Isn't that contradictory, Katsuragi-kun?" asked Horikita.

As expected, Horikita caught on to that detail.

"That's right. You participated during the self-introduction as the school '*instructed*'. However, instead of being an upright student who follows the instructions regardless of the teachers' absence, you were worried about the actual opposite, right?" mused Ichinose.

"Cameras have been set up to monitor our presence. However, this exam will test our thinking. If the school really wanted to evaluate our abilities, just seeing us inside the room wouldn't be enough," added Horikita.

In other words, hidden microphones. Katsuragi was weary of this from the start, and of course, so were Ichinose and Horikita.

"If you don't participate in the discussion, which was the main instruction for all of us, then the school might reprimand you for it." Ichinose used her words as a battering ram to siege Katsuragi's defense.

Horikita flawlessly kept up with all the arguments so far. Seeing my lack of participation, Hirata and Kikyuu must've gotten the message already-- that I've let Horikita take the spotlight this time.

"I see. This is why you're in the lower classes, and I'm not." Katsuragi sighed in disappointment.

Horikita reflexively opened her mouth, but she stopped before any sound came out. She started thinking about what she missed.

"Ayanokouji, you've been quiet, as well," he said.

And just like that, I'm right in front of Katsuragi's crosshairs. Ryuuen's smile widened in contrast to his narrowed eyes while



waiting for my response.

"I don't really have anything to add just yet," I replied.

"You do." I played dumb, but Katsuragi brushed it off without a problem. "Ichinose and Horikita may have a point, but they're not seeing the bigger picture. I expect you to know where I'm getting at."

Mentioning it was unnecessary in my position, though. But since I was compelled to say it, then I guess have no choice.

"Even if microphones were installed somewhere in this room, the school wouldn't be so petty as to punish the lack of participation as long as we're inside," I replied with a shrug.

I purposely made my answer incomplete. I won't let Katsuragi make me do the work for him.

"In other words, the school should already count silence as a viable method to tackle this exam. As the representative of Class A, I've concluded that it's the most fitting strategy for us." Even on a two-on-one, Katsuragi had successfully fended off their attacks.

Ichinose must've felt it, too-- that in front of her was the toughest gate of a closed castle. Well, even if she did, there's no way Ichinose would give up just like that, same with Horikita.

"I see... I assume that'd be the case for every Class A subgroup in every group?" she asked.

"Of course," answered Katsuragi.

Since Kikyuu is the VIP, this works for us. However, from the perspective of someone who wants to find the VIP, not having access to what one class had to say makes things a lot more difficult.

"Hahaha! I see, I see! You're going to turtle again, aren't ya, Katsuragi? Does it really feel that nice-- putting yourself inside a cocoon every time?" asked Ryuuken.

"Hmph, you don't have to mind us. We've shared enough information about ourselves and what we want to do. Cheap provocations won't work on us, Ryuuken."

"Oh, my bad. I didn't really intend to provoke you. It's just that your plan is so stupid that I can't help but crack up," he snickered.

He immediately saw the major flaw in Katsuragi's plan, but I found it strange. Someone like Katsuragi should've put everything into account. By doing this, he would allow us to strike back with a deadly onslaught...

After pondering for a second, I finally figured it out.

I see... So that's his true plan. If he manages to make his move, we won't get anything out of this exam. I can't let that happen.

"Well, we can't really force Katsuragi-kun to speak." Ichinose shook her head with a beck.



Everyone inside this room already knew about the obvious clues; like how there was an equal number of VIPs from each class, and how the Dragon Group was deliberately composed to pit the class representatives against each other. There was no need to discuss any of that.

"So, Ichinose? What's your plan now? If you want to find the VIP for this group, I'm willing to participate. Well, to kill time, of course." Ryuuken scoffed with a shrug.

"Will Katsuragi-kun and the rest really not participate? I think finding the VIP would be really hard if we can't talk with the people from Class A," said Kikyuu, slyly trying to fend off their eyes from her.

"I agree. In fact, their actions would naturally make us think that the VIP is from their class," followed Kanzaki.

We started having a real discussion about the test as time went on. Of course, Class A didn't participate until the very end. We were cut short, though. An hour passed by without me noticing.

Katsuragi and his classmates immediately went out of the room as soon as they were allowed to.

"And there they go. This is trickier than I expected." Ichinose sighed with a bitter smile.

"Heh. I'm sure we'll find something interesting in no time. Just hope that once everything gets laid out, your class is prepared to at least retaliate, Ichinose." Ryuuken and his entourage stood up and got ready to leave.

"Thanks for the warning, Ryuuken-kun, but you don't have to worry about us," Ichinose replied with a smile. She wasn't the least bit shaken by any of his words.

Ichinose's bright temperament was entirely different, if not the exact opposite of Horikita's cold demeanor, but they're both extremely tenacious and unmoving in the face of the enemy.

When our group finally dispersed, Hirata turned to us with a curious look.

"I was really impressed with Horikita-san earlier. Was this your idea, Ayanokouji-kun?" he asked.

"More or less. Horikita and I aren't good at socializing, but she shines in arguments and debates." I glanced towards Horikita before continuing. "To be honest, you've exceeded my expectations."

"It was a natural result. I was just applying what I've learned so far. In fact, I think I'm still a bit lacking."

Horikita responded while exuding coolness. The fact that her cool image wasn't intentional made it even more amazing. Her arrogant responses were now mixed with humble reflections.



"You were so great, Horikita-san. You went toe-to-toe with Katsuragi-kun and the others," said Kikyou.

"I'm sure Ayanokouji-kun could do it if he tried." Horikita deflected her compliment while giving me a side-eye.

It was understandable. There's no way she could take a straight compliment from Kikyou.

"Nah, I might piss my pants off due to nervousness," I replied.

Horikita rolled her eyes in response.

We've got six hours before the next discussion. The first one wasn't so bad, but I doubt things would go our way until the end.

That said, things are bound to get interesting.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 5.1 - Converging Strategies

"I see... So they're the VIP." Yukimura wore a grave expression upon learning the names of Class B's VIPs.

The four of us agreed to let a select number of people know about a fragment of our plans. The likes of Yukimura should put that information to good use.

"Yes, I want you to be on the lookout, Yukimura-kun," said Hirata.

"Sigh..." Yukimura exhaled, slightly slouching his back. "Of course. If it leads our group to victory, then I'm willing to work with even her."

Yukimura didn't mince his words even though he was right in front of Karuizawa's boyfriend. Well, it's not like Hirata isn't used to it. In contrast to the girls who respect her a lot, Karuizawa's reputation amongst the boys isn't the best, to say the least... though most of us still think she's really cute despite her attitude.

If she wasn't Hirata's girlfriend, I think some of the boys in our class might go for her.

"I heard about it from Kikyuu-- that there was a dispute between her and a bunch of Class D girls," I said.

Thanks to Kikyuu's massive social connections, I held all the vital information from every group. The matters in Yukimura and Karuizawa's Rabbit Group are one example.

"Ah, yeah... That Karuizawa, really... I witnessed her arguing with three Class D girls during the discussion. 'You remember that girl one who catfished Yamauchi; Manabe Shiho? Yeah, her and a couple of her female friends,' he narrated.

According to what Yukimura has told us, Karuizawa shoved a student named Morofuji Rika in a cafe earlier this summer. And Manabe Shiho, along with her friends, demanded she apologize.

"The conversation was civil at first, but she just had to do *that*..." Yukimura shook his head in frustration.

Obviously, Karuizawa would feign ignorance even if she knew about it. In response to her denial, Manabe tried to take a picture of her in an attempt to confirm her identity with Rika. That's when the tension skyrocketed. Karuizawa, in a panic, slapped Manabe's phone



away from her hand. One side argued that taking someone's picture without permission is wrong, and the other argued that knocking someone else's phone to the ground is wrong.

Yukimura sounded so fed up with it.

Hirata and I were aware of the reasoning behind Karuizawa's behavior, so we stayed quiet and continued listening. To be honest, it sounded like a fight between elementary students, but girls of their nature would inevitably clash that way.

"Manabe-san and her friends are known to be troublemakers within Class D, so I don't think things will end there. If you feel like they're planning to harass Karuizawa-san, please let me know, Yukimura-kun. I'll try to mediate the situation for them," said Hirata.

"Yeah... I don't know the truth so I won't make any judgments, but if Karuizawa's at fault, then apologizing might do her good," replied Yukimura.

It may have sounded like a good and natural response from "*Hirata*", but Yukimura didn't notice how strange it was coming from a "*boyfriend*".

Anyway, I've heard a lot about Manabe Shiho and her group of friends. Even if Karuizawa apologizes for what she's done, there's a big chance that they'll continue to gang up on her, especially since she's alone.

Also, it's my chance to see just how true Karuizawa's so-called past is.

Around 5:00 PM, on the main (5th) deck.

Ichinose-san and Kanzaki-kun arrived at the exact promised time.

"Sorry for the hold-up, Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. We originally planned to come sooner, but a few of our classmates needed my help on something." Ichinose-san apologized with a smile.

As usual, unlike Kushida-san's fabricated smiles, hers looked genuine.

Though as of late, Kushida-san's smiles tend to look genuine, too, especially when she's around Ayanokouji-kun.

Well, it's not like I'm experienced enough to accurately judge whether a person's smile is genuine or not, anyway.

"It's nothing to worry about, Ichinose-san. Ayanokouji-kun and I have been enjoying some nice tea," I replied.

"You mean *you're* enjoying some nice tea..." Ayanokouji-kun followed up with a side comment.

"Ahaha. Well, well, I would still like to apologize since I'm the one who asked you to come."



Ichinose-san and Kanzaki-kun took their seats and ordered drinks. Once again, the four of us are sitting together around one table.

"It seems like our usual conclave came sooner than expected," said Kanzaki-kun.

"You bet. I'm just a tagalong right now, though." Ayanokouji-kun replied with a shrug.

"It's fun, you know? I think cooperation between classes is a nice thing, especially in our freshman year," said Ichinose-san.

"That's an interesting statement, Ichinose-san. Before we proceed with what you wanted to discuss, can I ask you one question?"

"Sure, Horikita-san. Fire away."

"Do you think our alliance will cease to exist after our freshman year?" I asked.

"Ohh, that's a good question~!" Ichinose pondered for a second before answering. "Yeah, I think so."

"If the alliance between Class B and C lasts for a whole school year, then that would be ideal. But given how close the gaps between class points are, I think it might dissolve even before we become second years," added Kanzaki-kun.

"Yep, I think Kanzaki-kun has a point. It's not like we'll have any bad blood between our classes, though. One of us four (classes) will graduate as Class A, so at the end of the day, we're all rivals competing for the same prize." Ichinose-san crossed her arms as she spoke up with confidence. "Ah-! But of course, even if the alliance is gone, our classes can still cooperate whenever the situation calls for it. I don't like using the word '*enemies*' when you guys are obviously my friends."

Someone like Ichinose-san can rally people around herself with ease. It's a quality that I can only dream of having the way I am now. And Ayanokouji-kun has made it clear to me time and time again-- that in this school, I needed allies to win.

If I kept trying to work alone, I might've ended up being leagues behind Ichinose-san...

"Thank you for answering my question."

"Ahaha, no worries. Now then, since you've agreed to hear me out, I'll get straight to the point." Ichinose-san gestured with her pointy finger. "I have a strategy that would guarantee a risk-free draw for both of our classes."

"Can I try to guess what that strategy is?" I asked.

"Hm? Do you have an idea? Sure!" she replied.

"Is it some kind of VIP-trading strategy?"

Ichinose-san's eyes widened for a moment before her expression turned mellow.

"As expected from you, I guess," she said.



"No, Ichinose-san... I'm just as appalled as you are."

"Eh? How so? Your guess was on point..." Ichinose-san tilted her head in confusion.

"That wasn't *my* guess. It was Ayanokouji-kun's. We've talked about what you might possibly need from us. A strategy meeting involving the trade of VIPs was his prediction... and it seems like he was right," I sighed.

The two of them smiled bitterly as they stared at Ayanokouji-kun.

"It was just a lucky guess. It's not a big deal." As usual, he's shrugging things off. "So? Care to elaborate, Ichinose?"

"Mn, of course. To put things into perspective, the aim of Katsuragi-kun's strategy was obvious. Since it's been a common conclusion that there's an equal number of VIPs from each class, he wants to keep the status quo by waiting until the very end. It's a solid strategy, but the danger of the VIPs from Class A getting found out still lingers. So, I thought about a strategy where that isn't a problem. In other words; trading VIP names with each other," she explained.

"I see. You want our cooperation to trigger Outcome #4 in all six groups to remove any possible negatives."

It's a foolproof strategy. If we agree to trigger Outcome #4 for all of the groups where the VIPs are from our classes, then the 150 class points worth of penalties and rewards would cancel each other out. If we can successfully pull it off, both Class B and C will get guaranteed net earnings of 1.5 million private points while not having to worry about any minus in class points. However...

"There are quite a few problems with this strategy, Ichinose-san," I said.

"Mn, I'm aware," she nodded.

"It's easy to identify the flaws considering that only four classes are competing with each other."

"Exactly. In this strategy, speed is important. To remove the possibility of other classes submitting the names of our VIPs, it's essential to do the trading as soon as possible. And that's where the main flaw comes in. As written in the rules, the school will send an automated email to notify all students that a group's exam has been finished. Once we execute the plan, Katsuragi-kun and Ryuen-kun will instantly notice that the VIPs came from our classes."

"That's under the impression that they know who the VIPs from their own classes are and the group they belong in."

"We have to assume that they do. Those three names are the best cards for anyone who wants their plans to go smoothly."

"I agree with you on that," I nodded.

"Now then, if Ryuen-kun and Katsuragi-kun notice our strategy,



they'd most likely end up doing it themselves as an obvious measure. After all, their classes are the only ones with targets left in the field."

"Which means Class A wins via draw. Ryuuken-kun can't afford to be uncooperative when that time comes, too. After all, his class is in the worst position. If a pattern exists, we're still in the race to find out, but the difference is that there are no targets from our classes.

Ichinose-san finished elaborating on the first noticeable flaw in her plan. Seeing how she leaned back and sighed, it seems like Kanzaki-kun will do the talking for the other flaw.

"The second flaw is the more obvious one. I'm sure you've already taken that into account from the start, Horikita. After all, you never even considered the possibility of triggering Outcome #3 even if it yields the same results," he said.

"Of course. We may be in an alliance, but sharing the names of the VIPs is an entirely different can of worms," I replied.

We can trigger Outcome #4 without any risks. For example, in the Rabbit Group, we can assign Yukimura-kun and Hamaguchi-kun to do the job. Hamaguchi-kun will enter a random name while Yukimura-kun supervises his process to ensure that he doesn't submit someone from Class B. After all, there's still a one in three chance for him to submit Karuizawa-san's name.

This method allows us to trade VIP points without giving out any names.

"We can still sign a memorandum to try and make the plan go smoothly. In the event that the contract gets breached, we can put in penalties that will be effective after the exam. However, even if we sign a pledge, the risk of betrayal cannot be removed because of the anonymity rule. If you can remember that one reminder from the manual; *"The rules and instructions will override all contractual conditions."*, so a pledge would be borderline useless if we cannot precisely identify who betrays whom," he explained.

That's true. And if the pledge had conditions of penalizing a group of people to ensure the enforcement of the contract, the school would most probably reject it.

The reason for this rule was to prevent a foolproof VIP-trading strategy for two classes by triggering Outcome #3, then using the 6 VIP names to figure out the VIPs from the other two unknowing classes.

For example, if Class B and Class C use Outcome #3 to execute the VIP-trading strategy, we can find the pattern before sending in our traded answers. If that happens, we can just submit the names of Class A and Class D's VIPs along with our traded answers and win the entire thing-- with a fifty-fifty profit distribution, of course.



It would've been very easy if two classes worked together from the start, but none of us are that naive. It's especially true after the island exam. It's become crystal clear to all of us that subterfuge and foul play were highly effective strategies to win in these special exams and the school had taken that into account.

As expected, they've been incredibly thorough. No loopholes can be found at all.

"You knew this plan wouldn't fly from the start, didn't you, Ichinose?" Ayanokouji-kun, who did nothing but listen, finally opened his mouth.

"Yep, you're right," Ichinose-san replied with a grin.

"Then why did you even propose this in the first place?" I asked.

"To let you know our intentions. If Class A and Class D ever work together, we can at least have a last resort," answered Kanzaki-kun.

All of us are on the offensive right now, but if we're forced to play defensive, we'd have a trump card to prevent any casualties. Ryuuen-kun mocked them earlier, but Class C was actually already prepared.

The drinks that Ichinose-san and Kanzaki-kun ordered finally arrived. With more students coming inside, we finally stopped talking about the details of the exam.

"Why aren't you getting as involved, Ayanokouji-kun? I'm kinda curious." At the close of our strategy meeting, Ichinose-san unhesitatingly asked an unrelated question.

"I'm not too good with exams like this. It's one thing to think of stuff, but debating them out loud isn't my forte. That's why Horikita is our team's leader this time," replied Ayanokouji-kun.

Liar. I can still vividly remember the time when you ruthlessly dismantled Chabashira-sensei's motives back in April.

"Really? You're a pain in the butt whenever we argue though..." said Ichinose-san.

"Arguments between friends are different from high-tension debates," Ayanokouji-kun responded lazily.

"See?! Just like that!"

"They're really close aren't they?" Kanzaki sipped his drink with a soft smile. "But both of them are leaders of their respective classes, so even if they're rivals on a fundamental level, seeing them like this doesn't feel strange at all."

"I guess so."

After some more casual conversations, we finally decided to break off.

I quietly walked behind Ayanokouji-kun. I stared at his back with different thoughts running through my mind. I formulated a hunch that may have been brought on by being with him for a long time,



but if I turn out to be right, then I'd probably feel a bit conflicted.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*To clarify the specifics of the Memorandum Restriction:*

*The act of signing memorandums isn't prohibited. However, if the contents can directly affect the results of the test, then the contract itself will be nullified. Contracts must be vague enough for them to be approved, at least during this exam.*

*(The following will be simplified examples. I only put the main idea for each contract.)*

#### ***Example of an Invalid Contract:***

*- Class B and Class C will reveal their VIPs' identities to each other and trigger Outcome #3. The test results and the emails sent by the school will be used as evidence. Breach of contract will result in expulsion for the party that's proven guilty.*

*The conditions of this contract are fool-proof, so the parties involved will be compelled to follow them. This allows both parties to manipulate the results of the test with help of a contract, which is prohibited as stated in the Memorandum Restriction rule.*

#### ***Example of a Valid Contract:***

*- A pledge where the involved parties will not betray each other.*

*- A contract involving private point exchanges after the exam.*

*Ryuuen actually used the pledge proposal in the canon. However, Suzune refuted him by stating the anonymity rule.*

*As stated earlier, "the rules and instructions will override all contractual conditions". So, even if the offended party wants to open an investigation to know whether the other party betrayed them, the school will not reveal the real name of any VIP should he or she choose to remain anonymous. After all, anything regarding the contract cannot veto the rules and instructions of the exam. Hence, they will not be 100% compelled to follow the contract regardless of the penalties.*

*"The Memorandum Restriction rule does not deliberately encourage subterfuge between the parties involved. It was made to act as a deterrent so the parties involved won't try to manipulate the results without any risks." - ANHS*

*In hindsight, the absence of the Memorandum Restriction rule would've invalidated the exam as a whole. If two classes used my example of the "Invalid Contract" in the canon, it would've been possible to work together and destroy the other two classes before they could even retaliate, and this exam would've been a joke.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 5.2 - Deadlock

Well, I guess that was a fruitful meeting for Horikita.

I'm sure Katsuragi already beat us to the punch with that VIP-trading strategy. However, he knew that none of us would ally with him. After all, they're Class A-- they're at the top. All of us aim to topple them off their throne.

That said, I think Horikita will be able to figure things out in the end.

8:00 PM arrived and it was finally time for our second group discussion.

"Woah... They really did sit in the far corner..." Ichinose smiled bitterly seeing all four Class A students get settled in the back.

"Katsuragi-kun, do you really not want to talk with us?" asked the troubled Kikyou.

"I've already concluded our stance, have I not? And besides, I'm sure there are enough people for you to talk with. That said, thank you for your concern, Kushida." Katsuragi gently replied.

"I think finding the VIP would be hard if you don't join in, though," said Hirata.

"I could also speak for every other group, Katsuragi-kun. Would you please reconsider your strategy? I believe participating in the discussion would help us clear the exam. I'm sure it'll benefit Class A, as well." Ichinose stood up and faced him head-on.

"No matter how many times you try to convince me, I won't change my mind." Her determination was admirable, but Katsuragi only shook his head in response.

Ichinose refrained from replying. She doesn't want to give in, but there were no other options. Well, there is one, but none of us would suggest it apart from him...

"Kukuku, c'mon Ichinose. Why don't you tell him what's up instead of staying silent? I know you're thinking of that strategy. Even Katsuragi would be thoroughly crushed by it," snickered Ryuen.

"Are you fond of such a strategy, considering that you're Class D?" asked Kanzaki.

"It's the easiest way to siege Class A, isn't it?" he replied with a shrug.

Ichinose sat down with a somber expression after acknowledging



Ryuuen's proposal. Kikyuu and Hirata did the same. I glanced at Horikita who was beside me. She stayed composed, calmly observing everyone inside the room.

"So, how about it? I'm sure you've arrived at the same conclusion the moment Katsuragi unveiled his strategy. To break his seemingly impenetrable defense, we just need to attack all at once." Ryuuen chuckled seeing our firm faces. "We'll work together. We'll share the names of our VIPs and from there, figure out the pattern to crush Class A."

After Katsuragi declared his plan, it was all too easy for all of us to appraise this option. I'm sure Horikita and Ichinose have already considered it after thinking things through. Katsuragi's plan made us feel cornered, but it also unlocked the possibility of all three classes teaming up against him.

However, looking at Katsuragi now, the man didn't even feel the least perturbed. Ryuuen's suggestion bypasses the school rules and ensures Class A's defeat, but Katsuragi's composure didn't feel fake at all.

"Hmph. Let's entertain that idea for a bit, Ryuuen-kun. Surely, we'll be able to get some results by cooperating. However, if we're talking about benefits, I wouldn't be hasty in working with you in particular," said Horikita.

"The island exam has shown us how easy it was for students from different classes to betray each other. That goes double for someone like you." Kanzaki voiced his agreement.

"Well, we can make a pledge, you know? How about making '*expulsion*' the punishment? Would that satisfy you? I'll even make the contract myself," he replied.

"It doesn't matter even if we sign a contract. Vague terms will only work against us, anyway. And because of the rules, it's practically impossible for us to know who betrayed whom. Let's say you betrayed us. If we don't have enough evidence to work with, we could only dream of expelling you for breaching the contract," argued Horikita.

"So it's a no-go for you two, huh? What about you guys? It seems like they disagree with the plan." Ryuuen continued smiling as he faced Ichinose and Hirata. "You've thought of this too, right? Both of you hold more influence on your respective classes. If you go along with my plan, I'm sure it would be good for your points."

"I'm sorry, Ryuuen-kun, but I agree with everything that Horikita-san said. That's why I stayed silent," replied Hirata.

"It's quite the plan, but both of them had good points. And besides, I don't think I can work with you. You've hurt the people of Class C with your actions. Even if it's possible for us to get more



points, we can't be allies for that reason alone." Ichinose replied with a serious expression.

"Well, that's unfortunate," answered Ryuuen.

He didn't look dejected at all. Seems like he expected everything that came out of their exchanges.

This was why Katsuragi didn't feel shaken in the slightest. He simply figured out that a three-way-tag team between our classes wasn't realistic at this point in time.

At that moment, Ryuuen's eyes finally veered toward me.

"Hey, you're pissing me off, Ayanokouji. When will you stop acting like a damn mute?" Ryuuen's tone turned sharp. It would make anyone feel intimidated.

"I'm not. I just don't think that it's necessary for me to talk, so I'm not talking," I replied.

"Heh, what a joke. You're seriously leaving this to Suzune?" he scoffed.

"She's plenty capable. I'm sure we'll be fine," I answered with a shrug.

"Alright then. Suit yourself." Ryuuen then faced Horikita. "Did you hear that, Suzune? It seems like you're the one I'm up against--for real this time."

Ryuuen knew that I was the mastermind behind Class B's successes, so it was natural for him to conclude that Horikita was just acting during the negotiation.

"Well, I can't just leave everything to Ayanokouji-kun all the time. I may be lacking compared to him, but I won't make things easy for you, either," replied Horikita.

"Interesting..." Ryuuen glared at the two of us before asking a question that took us on a trip down memory lane. "That thing with the recordings-- Was that planned by you, Ayanokouji?"

"What's the point of asking? It happened a month ago."

He must've been thinking about the things that lead up to his defeat. With a piece of fabricated evidence, Ryuuen has been nothing but confused.

"Let's put the recordings aside for now... I'm just curious. How did you know that I was planning to crush Ike and Yamauchi?" he asked.

Since Kikyou was present, I don't wanna end up talking about the audio bugs. I suppose I can entertain Ryuuen for a bit. I'll drive his attention away from the recordings until the discussion ends.

Ichinose also turned to me. Given how she was the catalyst for my conclusion back in July, she should be able to infer a few things from our conversation.

"Your first mistake was to attack us again after failing your first



attempt."

"Hahaha..." Ryuuken chuckled slowly until he let out a laugh. "Hahaha! So you knew about it, after all-- that I tried to mess with Sudou. I was mulling over how you got to prepare, but I guess it all makes sense now."

If I was in Ryuuken's position, I, too, wouldn't have expected someone to figure anything out from a simple fistfight. It shouldn't have been suspicious given Ken's personality and reputation. Ryuuken's plan would only become clear once the hearing and trial happens, but everything would've been too late by then.

"I was just lucky. He's a close friend of mine, so of course, I'd hear about it."

"Quit the clown show, Ayanokouji. No ordinary person would ever conclude that I was attacking your class just because Ishizaki and the others almost fought with Sudou. The traces, evidence, motives-- All of them had to be meticulously investigated. Only someone like you could come up with a deduction that leads to *me*."

I could play dumb as much as I can, but doing that just risks the loss of my control over the conversation.

"Sigh... I told you, I just got lucky. I wouldn't have been too vigilant about it if I didn't notice the large point decrease for Ichinose's class in June."

Any more and Hirata would figure out that Horikita and I lied back then. And worse, Kikyou would ask about the details of how we really negotiated with Ryuuken.

"Ahh, I remember that! You called me on a Sunday, right?" asked Ichinose.

"Mn," I nodded in response.

I stayed silent, waiting for him to continue.

*"Let's stop talking about pointless stuff and just continue discussing the exam."* was what I wanted to say, but Ryuuken would immediately notice how forced that sounds. He would sense that I was trying to run away.

"Well, whatever. You've bested me on two separate occasions now. However, it's really thrilling when I'm up against someone who's just as if not more cunning than I am." Ryuuken leaned back, putting his hands behind his head while resting it. "I just can't get enough of it."

Fortunately, Ryuuken was under the impression that Kikyou and Hirata knew everything. That's why he wasn't uncorking the details. I can't let him figure out that Horikita and I were keeping things from the two of them-- at least not yet.

"Now then, why don't we go back to this Zodiac test? I don't know about you guys, but I already know all of the VIPs from my



class. It's only a matter of time before I figure out yours."

In stark contrast to Katsuragi, Ryuuen's strategy was to attack. And unlike Class B or C, he rules his class as a tyrant, so it was only a matter of time before the VIPs reveal themselves to him.

"There's no way for you to figure out the pattern. We don't know if it even exists," said Horikita.

"Trying to fool me is useless, Suzune. The school basically gave that information for free," he replied with a narrow grin. "And besides, I have my own methods. Whether it's by the use of wits... or by the use of force."

"You're crazy. Even if you can utilize force as a means to your end, it's useless for this special exam. We're heavily monitored, and violence is handled with harsh punishments. And besides, we ought to use our *'thinking'* in this test. If you can't do that, then you've already lost, Ryuuen." Kanzaki heavily criticized his proposed methods.

"Maybe you're really just an idiot, Kanzaki. Since our *'thinking'* is the one being tested, it's natural to *'think outside the box'*. If you keep kissing the school's ass by worshipping the rules, then don't start crying when everything ends on Class C's loss." Ryuuen easily countered him with his own logic.

It seems like all we can do for now was agree to disagree. None of our discussions led to progress and Class A's lack of participation proved to be a huge problem.

1st Day, 9:00 PM.

The second group discussion and the exam's first day finally came to an end. I should prepare an explanation for Hirata and Kikyou since Ryuuen mentioned the word *"recordings"* earlier. But unless they ask me, I'd rather not tell them anything.

That aside, I should start thinking about the moves I will make for this special exam.

Right now, all four classes were stuck in a deadlock. Thanks to Kikyou, my information sphere was much more massive than I could ever hope for. However, looking at the plans I have in store, none of them would work perfectly unless this deadlock was broken.

In order for that to happen, one unpredictable variable was needed-- one that none of us would see coming-- one that would turn everything into pure chaos.



Earlier...

Tsube Hitomi and Kushida Kikyō were having a conversation while the others debated.

"Say, Kikyō-chan... They're kinda scaring me, especially Ryūen-kun..." said Tsube.

"It's alright, Hitomi-chan. I doubt our classmates would lose in... uh, whatever they're arguing about." Kushida tried to cheer her up with a smile.

"Kanzaki-kun and Ichinose-san have already consulted me with all the possible and tangible approaches to find the VIP, but our ideas were all sorts of the same," she shrugged with a carefree smile.

"Ahh, to be honest, a lot of my friends already asked me about this stuff, but apart from the advice that Horikita-san and Hirata-kun already gave them, I couldn't really offer anything else."

"I can't really blame whoever the VIP is for hiding themselves. If I was chosen as the VIP, I would also try my best to act like I wasn't."

"Hmm~? Like how you're doing now?" teased Kushida.

"Ehehe, yeah, pretty much. We're friends, and our class leaders are allies with each other. But even then, we can't just do something on our own. Since our actions may affect the entire class, it's better to leave the super important stuff to the capable ones. For now, all I can do is stand by and be ready to support them."

"I totally feel you... Well, I'm sure Hitomi-chan's support will be valuable to Class C. You're a smart girl, after all."

"You're much more amazing, Kikyō-chan. You're cute and you have a lot of friends. I'm really just your plain, old honor student who can be sporty at times. If it wasn't for Honami-chan's efforts in bringing the class together, I don't think I would be friends with Yume-chan and the others."

"That's not true. And besides, we're pretty much the same. You're very social yourself, Hitomi-chan. You can talk with just about anyone!" Kushida said. "And besides, if it wasn't for Kiyotaka-kun, our class wouldn't even be in its current position."

"Yeah, Ayanokouji-kun is amazing, isn't he? Even though we're not classmates, I can't help but admire him." Tsube said candidly, but a small blush could be seen on her pink cheeks.

Kushida and a lot of Class C girls were already privy to Tsube's small crush on Ayanokouji, much to her denial. She could only sigh while thinking about how her best friend stole the hearts of many. His smarts, handsome face, and mysterious nature were a huge hit among the first-year girls.

"Anyway, I'm not as great as Honami-chan when it comes to strategy talks. And in this exam, we're almost required to lie. I may



be book-smart and athletic, but if I was on the frontlines like Honami-chan, I doubt I could keep up." Tsube went back to the topic with a bitter smile.

"We're in the Dragon Group, after all. Most of us probably wouldn't last if we go up against the leaders of each class," replied Kushida.

*"Well, it's not like I can't understand what they're talking about, but I need to keep acting like the 'normal' Kushida Kikyou, lest Ryuuken-kun catches wind of my identity as the VIP..."* she thought.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 6.1 - Catalyst

The Dragon Group members from Class B decided to have dinner together in a nice sushi restaurant.

"Ahh~! That was something, wasn't it?" commented Kikyō.

"Yeah. I'm glad Horikita-san was there with us. It gave me a feeling of reassurance," said Hirata.

"We're still far from winning. Since the exam just started, I'm sure their real plans are yet to be revealed," she replied.

So far, Katsuragi's "*Garrison*" plan had remained solid. Ryūen's "*Siege*" plan is still in its early stage, but it's unclear how or what he'll do to progress things. Meanwhile, Ichinose had only revealed her defensive trump card with us as their partner. Class C's real plan to tackle this exam is still a mystery.

"It's good that you're being vigilant, but man I'm starving," I said, rubbing my stomach.

"If it wasn't for our agreement, I would've scolded you by now. That said, it's quite refreshing to see an uncooperative Ayanokouji Kiyotaka." Horikita raised an eyebrow.

"Shut up. This was my original plan, anyway. Once we reach Class A, don't expect me to help with leading the class ever again. It's too much stress."

Hirata looked at me with a curious expression. My decision to permanently step down was known only to Kikyō and Horikita, so his reaction makes sense.

"You've mentioned that to me before, too. If you're really serious, then I wonder how the class would take it," pondered Kikyō.

"Ayanokouji-kun, this is the first time I've heard of this. Would you mind explaining?" asked Hirata.

"Ah, I meant exactly what I said. Once we reach Class A, my plan is to permanently demote myself from leader to follower. Wait, no... It would be ideal to demote myself all the way down to the status of bystander..." I replied as I went off to my own fantasy world of living a *déjà vu* life.

"So you're planning to hand over your leadership to Horikita-san just like last time?"

"I've been thinking about that, too. But I don't think Horikita can lead the class as she is now." I said while glancing at her. "I'm sure you know the reason, yes?"



"I'm aware of my own shortcomings. First of all, the victory from the first special exam was all thanks to Ayanokouji-kun's efforts. He was also the main reason why Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun were saved from being sanctioned by the school. And of course, there's the purchase for the explanation of the S-System back in April." Horikita faced us with a sigh. "On the other hand, I've only been involved as one of the tutors. It was also thanks to the three of you that our classmates do not perceive my cold personality as hostile and undesirable. But since I'm not good with socializing, I can barely call any of them a friend."

"I guess giving Horikita a one-week trial was a good start. My decision back then also made it clear to them that she was my second-in-command. However, after I've gone off to my relaxing student life, what would happen if the other classes make a sudden comeback?"

"I see... You've been the *'leader'* in everyone's mind this whole time. If Horikita-san takes the reins and fails to produce the same result, it wouldn't be good for her position." Hirata contemplated with a serious expression.

Kikyou and Horikita's nonchalant reactions about my "retirement" helped a lot in how Hirata took it. And besides, seeing how he's just going along with us, it seems like Hirata respects my decision enough to not make an objection.

"I'm still confident in leading the class, but I doubt I'd do a better job," sighed Horikita.

It seems like I was successful in toning down her pride. Horikita Suzune has come to terms with the fact that there can be someone above her. To be honest, I thought about the possibility of her confidence getting shattered in the process, but Horikita was just as levelheaded as I imagined her to be.

"For that reason, I'm assigning you to be her co-leader, Hirata."

Hirata didn't seem at all surprised.

"Haha, I kind of expected that, to be honest," he laughed bitterly.

If they start failing in my absence, Hirata will be in charge of damage control. If he shares the leader status with Horikita, she wouldn't take the full brunt of our classmates' criticism.

"I'm not too fond of the fact that we're quite literally making measures for my future failures, but I guess it will be inevitable at some point, especially since we won't be getting much help from Ayanokouji-kun," Horikita sighed vexingly.

"Then do your best to make sure you won't fail. I don't want the class to start rebelling against you and demand I come back. That would be a pain to deal with," I shrugged. "Don't worry. I won't do anything detrimental for the class. But, the two of you will be the



next official leaders after we get promoted to Class A. I don't know when that will happen, but I want the two of you to be ready."

"I'll make sure that we'll be Class A by the time this exam ends," said Horikita.

"If you're that confident, then I guess there's nothing to worry about." I nodded before facing Kikyou. "I'm expecting you and Karuizawa to support them in the future, Kikyou."

"Leave it to us!" Kikyou nodded enthusiastically.

Since the opportunity has presented itself, Hirata finally asked the other important question.

"By the way, Ayanokouji-kun, I was a bit curious about what Ryuen-kun said earlier."

"It's about the recordings, right?"

I got straight to the point. There's no use in keeping things under the rug.

"If it's something that you don't want to talk about, then please don't force yourself to answer."

Horikita was on high alert. She was probably preparing to back me up if I ever get into a tough spot. Meanwhile, Kikyou stayed silent and waited for the conversation to progress.

"It's fine. Ryuen was just talking about the case with Ike and Yamauchi. At first, Horikita and I decided to hide it from you. After all, it was out of respect for Ryuen and our negotiation. However, it seems like he was under the impression that both you and Kikyou knew about the details."

"Yes, so there should be no harm for the two of you to know the idea behind it, at least," added Horikita.

"Oh, I see... So the reason you told me before was just a cover-up then?"

*"I had Horikita admit defeat to Ryuen."* Really, what a silly excuse.

"Yeah, pretty much," I replied with a shrug. "Long story short. I used a cassette recorder to forge some evidence against Ryuen. I'll spare you the details, but through Sotomura's help, I was also able to fool Ryuen into thinking that I used phones instead of recorders."

"I believe you've mentioned it to me before that Kushida-san knows about the recorder," said Horikita.

"Yeah. You've seen it before, right, Kikyou?" I asked.

"Mn. It's that small one, right?" Kikyou replied with a quick nod.

"Yeah, I bought some new films for it. Anyway, as much as possible, I don't want you to mention that device to Ryuen. Hiding it gives us a considerable advantage until he finds out about it himself."

"I see. So that was the reason why Ryuen-kun and his classmates



withdrew from the case..." said Hirata.

He and Kikyō nodded in agreement.

That should be good enough for now. I used the cassette recorder to cover up the existence of those audio bugs. And since both were covert devices used for espionage, there were no immediate dangers to my lie.

Like me, Horikita must've been mentally sighing in relief. It's not an easy task to deceive smart people like Kikyō and Hirata. If even one detail felt off, my statement would completely fall apart. That's also why I decided to "*spare them the details*", which should already cast some doubt in their minds.

1st Day, 9:45 PM.

The four of us ate merrily and split up afterward. Ayanokouji-kun and I arrived inside the room and found Yukimura-kun on his phone. At the other end of the room, Kouenji-kun was nonchalantly doing some push-ups.

"Ah, Hirata, Ayanokouji, you two are finally here. I wanted to talk about the exam. Can I have some of your time?" asked Yukimura-kun.

"Of course, Yukimura-kun," I replied.

"Sure," followed Ayanokouji-kun.

He relayed the events regarding the second group discussion for the Rabbit Group to us.

"I don't know if she did that on purpose, but Karuizawa just made their hate for her skyrocket because of it."

"I mean, I'd be mad too if someone stepped on my foot and just ran off without a sincere apology," Ayanokouji-kun replied.

"Hirata, aren't you going to do anything about Karuizawa's actions? She was also flirting with some Class A dude, you know?" said Yukimura-kun.

"I'll be sure to talk to her about it. I want to hear Karuizawa-san's side before making a judgment," I replied, looking like I was mulling over it.

Karuizawa-san was a smart girl. She knows that my stance will always be neutral. It's the reason why she's been so reserved during the discussions. I also understood that Karuizawa-san solicited protection from Machida-kun; the Class A boy that she used to fend off Manabe-san and her friends. That aside, I was more concerned about resolving the bullying issue.

"Well, Karuizawa's issue aside, did you really not find any clues about the VIPs' assignment?" Ayanokouji-kun asked.

"No, unfortunately. Class A shut themselves off from the rest of the group. And apart from me, Hamaguchi was the only guy that



proactively tried to progress the discussions," he replied. "I guess that works in our favor since Karuizawa and Kushida are the VIPs for our respective groups, but unless we figure out that mystery pattern, all of this will end in a stalemate."

While we were talking amongst ourselves, Kouenji-kun started humming. Yukimura-kun, who'd been patient up until that point bolted out of his chair in frustration.

"Kouenji, would you drop the happy-go-lucky act already? We're not asking you to take things seriously, but you need to participate, at the very least. We don't want you to screw things up again like last time." He scolded him with a grave voice.

Kouenji-kun didn't even bother glancing back at him before responding.

"If you're talking about the island fiasco, I couldn't exactly help it. I was in awful shape. I couldn't force myself to do the impossible," he answered, continuing his push-ups.

"No one here is stupid! You just faked being ill to get out!" Yukimura-kun's temper wore thin.

I didn't like what he did, and I'm sure our classmates felt the same way. I was fine with him not contributing at all, but retiring without a proper reason was detrimental for the class.

Kouenji-kun finally halted his nightly workout routine. He stood up and grabbed a towel to wipe his neck.

"My, this test is nothing but troublesome, wouldn't you say?" Ignoring the topic at hand, Kouenji-kun commented on the current Zodiac test.

"Troublesome? You're not even thinking about this test at all!" countered Yukimura-kun.

"Well, there isn't any point in continuing a test that doesn't interest me, is there? Finding a liar is simple."

Kouenji-kun grabbed his phone and started fiddling with it. Only a few seconds passed before all four of us received a notification from the school.

*[The test has now ended for the Monkey Group. Those in the Monkey Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

"Monkey Group? Hey, that's your group, Kouenji!" shouted Yukimura-kun.

"Of course. And now, I finally have my freedom, once again. Adieu."

Kouenji tossed his phone aside, but Ayanokouji-kun called for his attention before he could make his way to the bathroom.

"Wait, Kouenji."

"You've gotta be kidding... This guy just..." Yukimura-kun shook



his head in dismay.

"Hm? Do you have anything to say to me, Ayanokouji?" Kouenji-kun gave him a side glance.

"The name you put in-- Do you think you triggered Outcome #3?" he asked.

"Hmph. This so-called '*special exam*' is nothing more than a simple quiz for me. I just said so a few seconds ago, did I not? Spotting a liar is child's play," he replied, combing his hair with a fwish.

"Who was it then?"

Yukimura-kun and I were baffled by the sudden change in atmosphere, but we stayed silent. Right now, knowing the VIP's name was vital.

"Why should I tell you?"

As expected, Kouenji-kun won't be making this easy for us.

"Let's make a deal then. If you tell me the name, I won't bother asking you to participate in the next special exam."

As our leader, Ayanokouji-kun had grounds to make that judgment. And besides, we've been doing very well even without Kouenji-kun's help.

"Oh? A measly name in exchange for peace? That is surely tempting." Kouenji-kun grinned while holding his chin, "However, it's not quite tempting enough."

"Of course, that's not the only offer that I have for you."

Ayanokouji-kun slowly walked up to him. He whispered something that only Kouenji-kun could hear.

"Hoh... I see. Very well, boy. You've got yourself a deal." Kouenji-kun snorted lightly as he turned around. "Minamikata Kozue. I believe that was her name."

He slipped inside the bathroom with a hum.

Minamikata-san...? From Class C? Wouldn't that mean...?

"I see. Thanks, Kouenji." Ayanokouji-kun turned to face the two of us. "Alright, it's about time we take a look at our phones, Hirata. I'm sure yours had been vibrating for a while now, too."

He was right. I've received tons of messages during the past minute. Our classmate must've been confused by what just happened.

"Sorry, Yukimura. The two of us will head out for while," he said. "Hirata, go up to the 4th deck and talk things out with Horikita and the others."

"How about you?"

"I have some other business to attend to," he replied.

The two of us got out of the room, but I asked him one last question before we split up.

"What did you tell Kouenji-kun to make him agree with you?"



The act of whispering meant that it was supposed to be a secret, but I asked, anyway.

"He'd probably want the details to be kept between the two of us, so I won't say anything specific." Ayanokouji-kun slightly turned towards me. "But basically, I gave him an offer he can't refuse."

Ayanokouji-kun wore the same expression that he always had. However, I sensed something different when I saw his eyes... and I felt a bit unsettled.



## SS.18 - This is Only the Beginning

It was around 10:00 PM when three adults met up with each other.

In an open bar lounge, Hoshinomiya Chie, Chabashira Sae, and Mashima Tomonari relaxed on a sofa with their drinks in hand.

"You know, it's been a long time since the three of us got together," commented Hoshinomiya.

"It is what it is. Fate. After bouncing around from one thing to the next, we all chose the teacher's life," followed Chabashira.

"Enough. There is no point in talking about that." Mashima-sensei sighed before taking a sip of his martini.

"Ah, that reminds me. You were on a date the other day, weren't you? You've got a new girlfriend, huh? Mashima-kun, you're quite the playboy. And here I thought you were the quiet, unsociable type." Hoshinomiya teasingly poked at him.

"Chie, what happened to the man you were with?" Ignoring her statement, Mashima threw the question back at her.

"Ah-haha~! We broke up two weeks ago. I'm the type of girl who breaks it off once the relationship starts getting serious. It's just like, see ya later!" she replied.

"That's what you'd usually hear from a guy."

"Ah, but I'd never do that to you, Mashima-kun. You're my best friend, after all. I'd hate to ruin our friendship."

"Relax, I'm not worried about that."

Hoshinomiya filled her empty glass with whiskey and downed it in one gulp, contrary to how calm the other two sipped their cocktails. She then looked at Chabashira and asked with a smile.

"Are you having fun, Sae-chan?"

"What are you talking about?" Chabashira, who'd been quiet until now, responded with a cool expression.

"Oh, please~. You don't have to hide how happy you are. Your class bolted through the rankings on the first month, all thanks to your precious Ayanokouji-kun," she said.

"He's certainly gifted. I can't really say anything else. Right now, he's the sole reason why my class is right behind Mashima's."

"Ahh~! Hey, Mashima-kun, this isn't fair! I want an Ayanokouji-kun, too!" Hoshinomiya lightly tugged his sleeves.

"Hey, stop that, Chie," he scolded. "Given how close the points



are, it's very possible for Sae's class to overtake us after this exam. However, that's even more dangerous, isn't it?"

"You don't have to act dumb, Chie. I know you're thinking about the same thing. Having Ayanokouji carry the class single-handedly would leave the class helpless if he ever gets expelled. You're banking on that possibility, right?" asked Chabashira.

"Wow, that's harsh, Sae-chan!" Hoshinomiya reacted comically before continuing with a bitter smile. "Honestly speaking, I'll never wish for any student to get expelled. At the end of the day, I'm still a teacher."

Seeing Hoshinomiya's genuine expression, Chabashira bowed her head lightly.

"Well, I guess that's true. My bad," she apologized.

"However, if a monstrous student like Ayanokouji falls victim to the future exams, your class will certainly take a huge hit-- one that they may never recover from."

Chabashira sipped her margarita with a sigh.

"You're misunderstanding something. The two of you have been looking at him too much, ignoring the existence of other students."

"No. At the very least, I'm not. Horikita Suzune. Her being the Student Council President's little sister isn't just for show. She's both academically and physically gifted. Kouenji Rokusuke. Apart from having an illustrious background, he's also on top in terms of academics and sports. Similar things could be said with students like Hirata Yousuke, Kushida Kikyou, and a handful of others like Yukimura Teruhiko, Nishimura Ryuuko, or Matsushita Chiaki." Mashima then gave her a side glance. "They're amazing students, but you might've forgotten why some of them were initially placed in Class D."

"Hmm... According to the records, Horikita-san stubbornly butted heads with her past teachers. Kouenji-kun exhibited extreme acts of negligence towards your class. And regarding the other achievers, some of them have been involved in troublesome past events from their previous schools," added Hoshinomiya. "Some just have weaknesses on others fields, though."

"You don't have to reiterate all of that for me. I know my students more than anyone. They're defective, and more than half of them could be considered dead weight. However, isn't that the purpose of this school? They'll slowly overcome their defects and become outstanding students. At least, that's what I believe." Chabashira finally emptied her glass.

"Woo-hoo~! 'Didn't expect the cold Sae-chan to be so soft with her students," said Hoshinomiya.

"Well, at least you're not losing your cool considering how your



class is already behind mine."

"Ahaha! I have amazing students, too, you know? It's never too late to catch up."

"Hmph. Let's say that your class becomes the new Class A after this exam. That wouldn't be enough to shake anyone. Remember, it's only the end of the first semester for their freshmen year. Even Sakagami-sensei's Class D will have lots of chances to make a comeback," Mashima elaborated calmly.

"You're right. This is only the beginning," nodded Chabashira.

They all had the same thought.

While it was normal to have extraordinary students here and there, a lot of special students were enrolled this year. The three of them recognized that, but as usual, only one class will take the top during graduation. As teachers, it'll be up to them to guide their own respective classes.

*Author's Notes:*

*Kiyotaka luckily overheard their conversation in the canon. That's not the case here, though.*



# Special Chapter - Ideas

Here are some of my ideas regarding CotE: Alter's hypothetical adaptations, music-wise. These are strictly ideas that have been swirling in my mind. I think these songs are very fitting to the volumes, characters, and scenarios that I've assigned them with.

To get the full experience, listen to the songs while imagining your own MV depicting CotE events.

Anime - (Each volume gets one cour/12 episodes)

**Year 1:**

**Volume 1:**

OP - *Zettai Zetsumei* by Cö Shu Nie

ED - *Asayake to Nettaigyo* by Boku no Lyric no Bouyomi

**Volume 2:**

OP - *Asphyxia* by Cö Shu Nie

ED - *Nemuru Machi* by Kujira feat. yama

**Volume 3:**

OP - *Kanadeai* by Itowokashi

ED - *Aoi Honoo* by Itowokashi

**Volume 4:**

OP - *Now or Never* by nano

ED - *Nevereverland* by nano

**Volume 4.5:**

OP - *Ao To Natsu* by Mrs. GREEN APPLE

ED - *Halcyon* by YOASOBI

**Volume 5:**

OP - *Justadice* by Seiko Oomori

ED - *Shout Baby* by Ryokuoshoku Shakai

**Volume 6:**

OP - *a.m.3:21* by yama

ED - *Avid* by SawanoHiroyuki[nZk]:mizuki

**Volume 7:**

OP - *Goya no Machiawase* by Hello Sleepwalkers

ED - *Non-Breath Oblige* by PinocchioP feat. Miyashita Yuu

**Volume 7.5:**

OP - *Memorable Film* by Mitei no Hanashi

ED - *Nerenai Yoru ni* by Kujira feat. yama

**Volume 8:**



OP - *Koe* by Hatena  
ED - *Haruka* by YOASOBI

**Volume 9:**

OP - *Grilletto* by GARNiDELiA  
ED - *Tabun* by YOASOBI

**Volume 10:**

OP - *PAPERMOON* by Tommy heavenly6  
ED - *Gunjou* by YOASOBI

**Volume 11:**

OP - *PLEDGE* by ASCA  
ED - *Koe* by ASCA

**Volume 11.5:**

OP - *Hanabiratachi no March* by Aimer  
ED - *Yubikiri-Genman* by Mili

**Year 2:**

**Volume 1:**

OP - *Untitled world* by ReoNa  
ED - *Stay Alive* by Takahashi Rie

**Volume 2:**

OP - *Reimei* by Sayuri × MY FIRST STORY  
ED - *Heikousen* by Sayuri

**Volume 3:**

OP - *Juvenile* by ReoNa  
ED - *Gray* by sajou no hana

**Volume 4:**

OP - *Seimeisen* by ReoNa  
ED - *Memosepia* by sajou no hana

**MVs - (Random selection of Characters/Character-focused)**

1. *Kawaiiku Naritai* by HoneyWorks feat. Amamiya Sora  
- Ichinose Honami
2. *No.1* by HoneyWorks feat. Natsukawa Shiina  
- Kushida Kikyō (Cultural Festival Performance)
3. *Sayonara Moon Town* by Scenarioart  
- Kamuro Masumi (Cultural Festival Performance)  
- Satonaka Satoru (Cultural Festival Performance)
4. *Saturday Night Question* by Megumi Nakajima  
- Matsushita Chiaki (Cultural Festival Performance)
5. *Mousou Express* by Kana Hanazawa  
- Amasawa Ichika
6. *Sweets Parade* by Kana Hanazawa  
- Shiina Hiyori
7. *Renai Circulation* by Kana Hanazawa  
- Shiina Hiyori



**8. Pray** by Chisuga Haruka

- Kushida Kikyou (Part 1)

- Karuizawa Kei (Part 2)

or

- Ichinose Honami

or

- Amasawa Ichika

**9. One Room Sugar Life** by Nanawo Akari

- Kushida Kikyou

or

- Sakayanagi Arisu

or

- Amasawa Ichika

**10. Hollowness** by Minami

- Kushida Kikyou

**11. Imakoko** by Touyama Nao

- Ichinose Honami (I mean, she literally voiced Honami)

**12. Suki dakara** by Yuika

- Hasebe Haruka

or

- Sakura Airi

*Author's Notes:*

*I made this chapter on a whim and most of the songs were picked from the top of my head. These are all ideas that I've never really written down before. I thought having these songs with CotE would be cool.*

*These are but a fragment of the ideas that I have. A lot, and I mean a lot of other songs fit quite well with the series. I've thought of alternative songs for all the volumes and I have tons of other MVs in mind. If you're interested, I might make another chapter like this if I have time.*

*If Hiyori ever gets into a possible anime remake/continuation, I hope she's voiced by KanaHana.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 7.1 - Early Morning

"Geez, why did you call me here, Katsuragi? It's so damn early."

"I'm just trying to make sure things won't go haywire, Ryuuen."

The time was 6:00 in the morning. Two students met up in an inconspicuous place, somewhere around the stern. Following the events of the first day, every student on the ship felt wary, albeit of varying degrees. Katsuragi Kouhei wasn't an exception.

"So? What do you want?" asked Ryuuen.

"Cooperation," answered Katsuragi.

"Keh, are you a masochist or something? Or perhaps you have a plan?"

"You're trying to figure out the VIPs' names, correct?"

"That's right. What of it?"

Ryuuen's smile grew sinister. He seemed to know where this is going.

"Let's make a contract again. If you happen to find the pattern, you will give me their names. I'm not asking for every VIP, but I'll exchange the 500,000 private points that we'll get for every name." Katsuragi explained his proposition.

Detailed contracts are viable when the negotiation is mainly focused on private points. Since Katsuragi's plan doesn't do anything to guarantee the manipulation of results, the contract will be deemed valid.

"Hoh? Now isn't that interesting? Well, some sort of pattern definitely exists, but I'd need two or three names from another class." Ryuuen leaned on the rails and crossed his arms. "I'm sure you're already aware of this, Katsuragi... but everything could be over in a flash if you just tell me all the VIPs from Class A, you know?"

"Of course, but I can't do that. Unless you can provide ironclad proof that you won't betray me, meeting your demand is impossible. And unfortunately, I don't have any VIP names outside of Class A's."

A disciplined and cautious man like Katsuragi will never give in to something so risky. Ryuuen understands that, so he had no choice but to back off.

"Well, 'guess there's no way around it then. With the Memorandum Restriction, making shady deals like this just isn't possible." Ryuuen smilingly sighed, looking exasperated. "Hahh..."



C'mon, Katsuragi. You gotta provide me some results. I'd be more motivated to cooperate with someone who does, you know?"

"I will try to help you in any other way, so there'd be no harm in cooperating with me. And besides, Class B and C are already collaborating. Unless we do the same, it would spell trouble for both of our classes," said Katsuragi.

"Heh, Class B and C? Bullshit. If they're taking their alliance seriously, this exam would've been over on the first day. Those clowns don't fully trust each other which means I still have a chance to rake in all of the rewards." Ryuuen scoffed with a shrug.

"Are you planning to break their alliance off by cooperating with one of them?" Katsuragi's eyes narrowed with a glint.

Given his methods, "*chicanery*" would be the more fitting word. Even if coercion wasn't a viable method, Ryuuen could still use verbal expedients to deceive his opponents.

"Those straight-laced damsels wouldn't want to hear anything out of me."

"Horikita and Ichinose, huh?"

"They could be pretty entertaining opponents. I could say the same for Kanzaki and Hirata, but as I've said before, I can crush them whenever I want. I've had my fun with you on the island, so I'll let you go this time. You're out here playing defense and using me as a failsafe, anyway. This deal might turn out to be of benefit for me," Ryuuen replied as the light in his eyes reflected a great thirst for prey. "If I really wanted to feel satisfied with a victory, Sakayanagi and Ayanokouji are the perfect stepping stones for me. It's unfortunate that I can't crush them right now, but I'll get my chance."

Katsuragi knew the kind of person Ryuuen was. He cared little for his show of arrogance, diverting his attention towards Class B's true leader instead.

"Ayanokouji won the first exam while being more than a hundred points ahead of Class C. Surely, he's an opponent that requires the highest amount of caution to fight against, but it seems like he's leaving this exam to Horikita."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Of course. I'm constantly on guard against whatever he may do, but right now, he's not even bothering with the discussions."

"I don't know about your experiences with him, but Ayanokouji isn't someone who lives in the light. He *feeds* on it." Ryuuen stood up straight before turning around. "That guy moves around in the dark. It's the reason why we lost without even knowing how."

"Then, that's perfect. I want you to keep an eye on him while you're at it. My hands are already full with keeping Sakayanagi's



subordinates in check, anyway."

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Just get the contract and money ready as soon as possible. Even if I don't get more names, I still have other methods to crack the code. Who knows? It's possible that I already know all of the VIPs and I'm just playing around with everyone." With those parting words, Ryuen walked away with his hands inside his pockets. "If everything goes wrong for you like what happened during the island exam, don't blame me if this ends up completely destroying your position in Class A."

Katsuragi watched him leave with skeptical eyes. Provocations and taunts rarely worked against him, but this time, he felt that something wasn't right.

Around the same timeframe, Horikita Suzune and Ayanokouji Kiyotaka were also having an early morning meeting with their allies from Class C; Ichinose Honami and Kanzaki Ryuuji.

"I'm sure the two of you already know the meaning of this, right?" said Horikita.

"I refuse to believe it, but I still want to ask... Are you targeting us?" Kanzaki asked with a slight glare.

Since Horikita and Ayanokouji called them there, intending to talk about what happened last night, then everything would line up. They knew that the VIP was from Class C which means the traitor was from Class B.

"You don't have to worry about that, Kanzaki-kun. We don't intend to break off our alliance this early," sighed Horikita. "The cause of the incident was Kouenji-kun. I'm sure you already know about him."

"Kouenji-kun, is it? He's a member of the Monkey Group, and as Ayanokouji-kun has mentioned to me before, he doesn't participate in anything class-related apart from written exams," said Ichinose.

"If I recall correctly, he also retired from the island exam without letting anyone know," contemplated Kanzaki. "So you're saying that he's to blame? He submitted a name on his own?"

"That's right. He made another selfish and reckless move because he refused to participate in the exam," replied Horikita.

After learning about the situation, Ichinose and Kanzaki appeared more composed. However, it didn't last long.

"And about the outcome... Do you think he got it right?" asked Ichinose.

"We think so, given your reactions. He submitted Minamikata-san's name," answered Horikita.



Ichinose and Kanzaki were momentarily shocked. Both Horikita and Ayanokouji immediately noticed this and concluded that Kouenji, has indeed, put in the right answer.

"Lying about it won't help us now, so we'll just admit it. Kozue-chan was indeed the VIP. Kouenji-kun probably performed some cold reading on her, but I still... find it appalling," said Ichinose.

Of course, there's always the chance that Kouenji didn't care about the risk. He might've decided to enter a random name and got very lucky. They didn't count that possibility out.

"There's one thing that I'm suspicious of. If Kouenji didn't care about your class, I doubt he'd give you the name so easily. It's possible that you're just working together with him," mused Kanzaki.

He didn't have a problem with playing the devil's advocate if it leads him towards the truth.

"That's not the case. It was Ayanokouji-kun who managed to negotiate with him." Horikita looked at Ayanokouji as if to pass the baton.

"Simply put, I made a deal with him. The details are only between the two of us, though. Even Horikita and the others don't know about it." Ayanokouji responded with a shrug.

"I see. Then I won't ask further..." Kanzaki nodded before facing Ichinose. "What do we do now, Ichinose?"

"If our plan works, then we might be able to recover from this... But it's still not a guarantee," she replied.

"You have a plan, Ichinose-san?"

"Hm? Yep, we do. Of course, we can't tell you the details, but if everything goes accordingly, our class might still have a chance. Of course, we're still willing to find the pattern. This secret plan of ours is just a failsafe." Ichinose answered without hesitation.

Ayanokouji observed Kanzaki's reactions. Seeing how he was unperturbed with Ichinose's seemingly reckless babbling, Ayanokouji concluded that it was also part of her strategy to let them know the existence of this so-called "*secret plan*".

"I envy you in that regard, then. My strategy is completely centered around finding the pattern. If I fail, then we'll have no choice but to force a stalemate, which isn't too bad given our current position." Horikita answered with a sigh.

She was also aware of Ichinose's way of thinking. By revealing Class C's plan, Ichinose indirectly forced Horikita to reveal her own plan. However, both of them were unafraid.

"That said, we actually have a proposal for you," said Ayanokouji. "If you would, Horikita."

"A proposal?"



"It's just another form of trade. We'll sacrifice one of our VIPs and have you trigger Outcome #3 in one group. In exchange, you'll give back the 500,000 private points you'd gain from us," explained Horikita.

"I see... In other words, you'll sacrifice your chance of instantly gaining speed against Class A for a massive amount of private points," replied Kanzaki.

"That's a great plan, isn't it? You're basically focusing on the long-term, or at least, a little over two months ahead," added Ichinose.

If Class B receives an additional 50 class points, that would be equal to 40 students receiving 5,000 more private points in a month, netting 200,000 private points in total. Only after two and a half months would those 50 class points become as worth as the instant 500,000 private points.

"But wouldn't that benefit us more in the far future?" mused Kanzaki.

"That's not necessarily true. Apart from daily expenses, private points have more uses that may help us in the upcoming exams. I'm sure you're aware of that already," countered Horikita.

The answer was obvious. Having a large number of private points at your disposal is a big advantage for future negotiations and purchases. After all, in this school, it wouldn't be unthinkable for a student to buy test scores from teachers.

At that moment, the two leaders of Class C pondered on the pros and cons of this deal.

"I have one last question." Ichinose crossed her arms. "Wouldn't triggering Outcome #4 be a faster option? There wouldn't be any need for us to sign any contracts."

"You pose a valid point, Ichinose-san. However, that's giving Class C too much of an advantage," answered Horikita.

She knew exactly what Ichinose was trying to achieve.

"I see. It seems like you've thought this through, Horikita-san," said Ichinose.

"It was a team effort between the four of us, though Ayanokouji-kun wasn't really present during our meeting last night."

"Hey, I made up for it by joining a group call," he bantered.

Ichinose chuckled after seeing their friendly exchange.

"Alright, we accept. We'll probably get the contract ready by tonight..." Ichinose narrowed her eyes with a bitter smile. "Because of the Memorandum Restriction, you might still be able to betray us in some way. If you ever do so, then that would be the end of our friendly relationship."

"Of course. We wouldn't do something so stupid. We're just taking advantage of Kouenji-kun's foolhardiness and treated those 50 class-



point bonus as a bargaining chip. And if we're giving those points up, we'd rather let our allies have them." Horikita sighingly replied.

"Any time today should be fine. I'll be the one who'll decide which VIP name to give you. If I'm not within the area, you can just send me a picture of the contract once it's done. I will send you the VIP name and their group after that," said Ayanokouji.

"I understand. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun, Horikita-san." Ichinose bowed lightly.

Their group split up and got ready for the day.

It was a tense early morning, to say the least. Such atmosphere was driven by the chaos caused by a single student named Kouenji Rokusuke.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*For those who didn't get why "triggering Outcome #4 would give Class C too much of an advantage", here's why:*

*The Monkey Group is now gone which eliminates one target from Class C. If they try to trigger Outcome #4 and win back the 50 class points, they would need to use a VIP and group that is also from Class C. They would then be left with one target while Class B would still have three. So, Horikita and co. concluded that if Ichinose wanted to accept this deal, they have to eliminate one target from Class B, as well, via Outcome #3.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 7.2 - Scriptwriter

2nd Day, 12:55 PM.

It was almost time for our 3rd discussion.

Sigh... To be honest, I'd rather have lunch with my friends forever... Everything just got more intense because of Kouenji's antics.

"Ah, Ayanokouji-kun, hello!" I was greeted by Ichinose's cheerful smile.

I was then noticed by the rest of the people in the room.

"Hey, Kiyotaka-kun!" waved Kikyuu.

Hirata and Horikita greeted me as well. My classmates were early as usual. In fact, it seems like I was the last person to arrive. Ryuen and his entourage could be found glaring at me on the other side of the room. I wish he could stop that.

*[The third group discussion begins now.]*

"Well, it doesn't seem like Katsuragi-kun and his classmates are interested, so I guess it'll be just Class B through D again." Ichinose opened the discussion with a bitter smile.

"Hey, Ichinose, can you tell me the point of discussing anything?" Ryuen grinned as he asked.

Ichinose briefly looked at him before sighing...

"Frankly speaking, there's no point," she replied. "At the end of the day, we're competing against each other. Our so-called 'discussion' will just go around in circles, repeating things that everyone already knows. After all, if you're holding some useful information, you won't share it with your rivals. Some might even take things further and spout lies to mislead everyone."

Amazing... She instantly recognized the pitfall that Ryuen set up for her. If she tried to act like the usual group leader, Ryuen would be the one saying all of those words, making Ichinose look like nothing but a hypocrite.

Well, I guess that's to be expected of her.

"Kuku. Exactly. So what do you suggest we do?" asked Ryuen.

"Well, our class is always willing to talk with anyone. But if you're not interested in that..." Ichinose took out a little something from her pocket. "Ta-dah~! I brought cards!"

Ryuen snickered in his seat.

"It's not like there's anything we can do during this hour. I don't



mind playing some games," said Hirata.

"Me too! Let's have some fun, Honami-chan, Hitomi-chan!" cheered Kikyou.

I looked at Horikita, who seemed a bit troubled by the current development.

"Do you wanna play? I'm down," I said.

"Hmm... I'd usually decline, but if I try to work on analyzing the code right now, it might bring some unnecessary attention. So perhaps I can participate..." replied Horikita.

How uncute and cute at the same time.

The seven students of Class B and Class C played cards during the hour. Ryuen and his lackeys approached Katsuragi. Due to the noise that we were making and their considerable distance from us, nothing could be made of their conversation.

I wonder if they decided to cooperate with each other. Since Katsuragi can't ally with either of us, he'd have no choice but work with Ryuen again. That shouldn't be the case unless he's desperate.

"Kiyotaka-kun, it's your turn." Kikyou called out to me.

"Ah, my bad."

In the end, we played a bunch of Daifugō and Old Maid. They were simple games, but if your opponents know what they're doing, things are bound to get complicated. Even the calmest of players would get fired up at times.

"Whew~! That was quite fun, wasn't it?" asked Ichinose.

We barely noticed that an hour had already passed.

"Yes! I'd love to play with everyone again," replied Kikyou.

"You were playing really well, Ayanokouji. I never expected you to be a beginner." Kanzaki complimented me with a nod.

"Well, it's true that I've only learned about these games in high school, but some of my friends have played with me before."

Namely; Haruka and the others.

"You're really competitive, Horikita-san. Playing with you was so much fun," said Ichinose.

"I was just playing by the rules. If I ended up winning, then I guess I got lucky with the card draws," she replied.

"Stop acting all cool and just admit- Ouch!" I tried to tease her which didn't end well for me. Horikita mercilessly struck my side with her elbow.

When we finished fixing things up, the students of the Dragon Group finally got ready to leave.

"How is everything going, Horikita? 'Got any leads?' I asked.

She looked at me and pouted for a split second. Adorable...

"You're finally done joking around? Well, that aside, I believe I'm making progress. I'm trying to piece the clues together. Why were



these students chosen as the VIPs? I'm sure there's a common factor that everyone is missing..."

With a small '*ding*', I received a message containing her current list. It didn't look any different from the previous one, but this time, Minamikata's name was also marked.

"Progress, huh? Care to fill me in?"

The two of us were alarmed after hearing the sound of a familiar voice from behind. Well, not really. Horikita was alarmed, but not me. We hastily turned around and saw Ryuuen's smug face.

"There's nothing for you here, Ryuuen-kun," said Horikita.

"Of course, of course. It's not like I'm interested in what you know, anyway."

"Oh? Sounds like you're confident."

"Why thank you for noticing. You see, I went all the way back to the root of this exam. After a while, I finally managed to figure out the code." Ryuuen's smile turned sinister.

However, Horikita wasn't shaken.

"Oh, I see. Congratulations to you, then. It seems like you've won the exam. Now, why don't you ask your subordinates from the other groups to submit the answers? Wouldn't that end this test once and for all?"

"Hah, don't be scared now. I'm still having fun playing around. I want to see how you'll protect the identities of your precious VIPs. And then, on the final day, right before the exam ends, I'll have fun crushing your hopes and dreams."

"Hmph, as expected, you're all talk. There's no point in *playing around*. If you really knew the identities of every VIP, you and your classmates would've submitted their names already. Your bluff is pitiful, Ryuuen-kun."

"Oh, relax, Suzune. There's no need to get so worked up. This exam is already won. No amount of strategy or tactics matters at this point. You can't change anything... *because you're just a part of the script*." Ryuuen narrowed his eyes as she waited for Horikita's response.

"And you're saying that you are the all-powerful scriptwriter?" Horikita raised an eyebrow.

"Keh, the answer should've been obvious from the start-- to you, at least." Ryuuen turned around and walked out with his classmates. "I'm looking forward to seeing how you'll do, Suzune."

"Sure. And stop calling me by my name. It feels extremely unpleasant." Horikita replied as she glared at his retreating back.

"He sure knows how to make a show out of everything." To be honest, even I was impressed.

In this case, what Ryuuen referred to as a "*scriptwriter*" doesn't



need to think about making any plans or schemes. If you know who the VIPs are, you're basically in control of the exam. You're free to make your own winning scenario with everyone as your puppet.

"I would love to discredit his arrogance as nothing but that, arrogance. However, it still frustrates me. If Ryuuen-kun has a lead, then he might really figure out the pattern before I do. Should Katsuragi give him the names of Class A's VIPs, then it's all over."

"Don't worry. That's impossible. If anyone's crazy enough to take that risk, it certainly wouldn't be Katsuragi."

"I know. He was already done in by him during the island exam. I doubt he'd make the same mistake and share that kind of information with Ryuuen-kun... But something's not right..."

"You already know four names. If Ryuuen was bluffing, then he would only have three names at the moment. You still have the advantage, Horikita."

"You're right. I just need to do this methodically. An answer will show itself soon enough."

"Yeah, I believe in you." I truly did. However, Horikita needed to realize some things before she can unravel the secrets of this exam.

"I won't let it come to the point where you'd be forced to lend a helping hand." She sighed before facing me. "Speaking of lending a helping hand, where were you last night? You didn't do anything to secretly help us, right?"

"I don't know if it counts, but I was searching for Chabashira-sensei on the fifth deck. I wanted to clarify something about the rules. If possible, I might be able to tamper with Kouenji's reward money."

"I see. It's certainly a valid concern. Such a large sum of private points would be wasted on someone like him, but is it even possible to do something like that?"

"Those temporary IDs interested me, but I can't be sure about anything. I didn't really find her last night, so my journey was fruitless."

After finishing my business, I contacted them via group call. That was how I managed to provide some input for our plans. Of course, most of the ideas were still theirs.

With all that's said and done, the four of us finally left the room. The third group discussion just ended, but apart from a handful of people, no one else knew about the real state of this seemingly unbreakable deadlock.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 8.1 - How Did He?

(11:12) *[That's true. Things will most likely escalate in "that" direction, so I doubt you'd be able to do what she expects you to.]*

(11:12) *[Yeah.]*

(11:12) *[This should've been my role, but I can't fight a war for anyone.]*

(11:12) *[If violence or anything related is expected of me, then I'd rather be uninvolved.]*

(11:12) *[I'm sure she'll lash out if I refuse to do what she wants.]*

(11:12) *[Well, it's understandable given her past experiences.]*

(11:13) *[Alright, I'll be taking care of her troubles from here on out.]*

(11:13) *[I know I asked you to do this, but is it really okay with you?]*

(11:13) *[Of course.]*

(11:13) *[Since Horikita will be the one who's preoccupied with the exam, I'm very free to use my mind somewhere else.]*

(11:13) *[I'll trust your methods, but please don't do anything to harm yourself like before.]*

(11:14) *[Don't worry, I won't do that again.]*

"Hm...? Kiyotaka-kun?"

"Airi? What are you doing here?"

I split up with the other three and continued treading the hallways. I was checking a certain online conversation when I coincidentally stumbled upon my friend, Sakura Airi.

"Ah, I was actually headed towards the Rabbit Group's room. Azuma-san gave me the okay for the photo that I took of her, so I thought I'd ask Sotomura-kun to recommend some good edits for it," she said, taking out a small memory card from her breast pocket.

"Oh, you and Haruka mentioned that during lunch, right-- the Photo Contest?"

"Yes... Haruka-chan suggested that I take part in that small competition before summer. At first, I was hesitant, but I made up my mind after seeing everyone else around me work their hardest."

"I'm happy for you. You're slowly opening up to more people. I can't believe you asked Azuma to be your subject."

"Mn..." Airi sheepishly nodded. "Azuma-san is really cute and her smile is perfect for the theme... but part of it is because I want her and Ichihashi-san to get along with Haruka-chan."



I see. I've heard Haruka briefly talk about it a long time ago. She didn't seem to have the best impression of them, much like how she did with Karuizawa and her group.

"You're such a good friend, Airi." I reflexively reached my arms and patted her head.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun... We're still out in the hallway, you know...?" Airi panicked as she fussed around to see if people were looking at us, but my actions made her visibly happy.

I'm proud of her, to say the least. She's even going so far as to ask for advice from Professor, an unfamiliar male classmate. Well, compared to Yamauchi and the other guys, he's the most approachable one despite his strange way of speaking.

The two of us continued walking towards the Rabbit Room and saw Professor walking out with Yukimura.

"Ayanokouji and Sakura? What are you doing here?" asked Yukimura.

"It seems like Airi has some business with Professor. Do you mind?"

"Ohh, Sakura-dono, you're here." Professor didn't look surprised at all. "It's about the contest, correct? I was already contacted beforehand and I gotta say, I'm quite honored to be of use. Please pass my thanks to Miyake-dono for recommending my personage."

"T-Thank you very much, Sotomura-kun... I'm looking forward to your evaluation."

"I'm not too well-versed with the intricacies of professional photography, but as someone who critiques 2D and 2.5D art with absolute precision, I will surely provide you with some useful advice."

Miyake recommended the right man for the job. He's probably the only person who can give Airi solid advice on what to actually do given his knowledge in things like photo and video editing.

While they talked about their own business, I barely managed to catch Karuizawa's figure walking out from the other door.

"Airi, you guys, I have to talk to someone right now."

Since I suddenly decided to see myself out, it's natural for them to look surprised.

Professor and Yukimura cocked their heads to the side, looking puzzled.

"E-Eh? Uh, okay. See you later, Kiyotaka-kun." Airi looked puzzled too, but she saw me off, regardless.

As my hastened footsteps drew nearer, Karuizawa turned around to see who came up behind her.

"Ayanokouji-kun?" she asks, slightly surprised by my appearance.

"Hey, Karuizawa."



The two of us looked forward as we walked side by side. We hurried towards the elevator without talking. It would be quite bad if Machida sees us acting all buddy-buddy right now.

"This is about Manabe and her friends, isn't it?" Karuizawa started the conversation as soon as we got far enough. She predicted my business with her without much difficulty.

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about them," I replied.

Karuizawa responded with silence. There was a lot to take in from my sudden involvement. As things stood, Hirata was in charge of "*protecting*" her. We were very close friends, but while I knew about her secret past, I didn't really have any special connection with Karuizawa other than the relationship between the class leader and the girls' leader. I was able to control the girls to some degree because of her.

That said, if she had any personal troubles, she would run straight to her boyfriend. Did Hirata send me here, or did I approach her voluntarily? Either way, what was the desired outcome? Karuizawa must've been thinking about those things.

"Hmm... On second thought, I don't think it's necessary for us to talk just yet. It's not like you're in trouble or anything, right?"

"Not really. Yukimura-kun and the other guy are useless, so Manabe and her group grew some balls to confront me. But I'm fine even during discussions. You don't have to worry about anything," she shrugged.

Karuizawa's calculated denial forced me to expose her lie-- or in her perspective; reveal the truth.

"You're lying. You've given Hirata the SOS call, haven't you?"

"Ahh, so you spilled it, after all. Hirata-kun sent you here, huh?"

The two of us entered the elevator and headed for the upper decks.

"Yeah, I already know that things aren't going to stay fine. Even if Machida can stave off their persistent hounding, you'll be in trouble if their patience runs out."

Karuizawa clicked her tongue as she thought about the potential events.

I also noticed that she wasn't surprised about my knowledge of Machida. It seems like she realized it when I played along with her initial silent treatment. Her observation skills are keen.

"That's why I'm always finding the best timings to get out of the room. I'm doing what I can to avoid them. If things get out of hand... Hirata-kun will..."

"You know he won't. If Manabe and her friends cross the line, Hirata won't do anything other than tell them to stop harassing you. You already know what his principles are. That's why you've been



behaving very well during the discussions. If Yukimura and Sotomura gave a damn about you, they would've noticed your strange behavior."

Her face distorted heavily after envisioning a dead end.

"Then... are you saying that you will help me?"

"It depends on what kind of help you need. Your role in class is extremely important. I won't let you get in trouble."

"I see..." Karuizawa looked a little relieved.

"If things get out of hand, you can contact me any time. Of course, I can't come to your aid when the group discussions are ongoing. So be sure to hold on to your shield until then," I said.

And by "*shield*", of course, I meant Machida.

I got off the elevator and began walking along the 3rd deck's hallway.

"It's not like I'm doing this because I want to..." Karuizawa mumbled under her breath.

The elevator door closed by itself and brought the anxious Karuizawa to the upper decks.

Well, you brought this onto yourself, Karuizawa. Don't worry, though. You'll realize the mistakes you've made soon enough.

It was just past 4 o'clock when Ryuuen Kakeru arrived at their meeting place.

"Why do you keep calling me out to some weird place, Katsuragi? Do you wanna see me that often?" Ryuuen snickered at Katsuragi's waiting appearance.

"I overheard your conversation with Horikita Suzune earlier. What's the deal, Ryuuen? Have you really figured out the code?" Katsuragi ignored his childish entrance and got straight to the point.

"Woah, impatient, aren't we?" chuckled Ryuuen. "Well, well, well. It seems like my price on the market just skyrocketed."

"Is it true then? Do you have the names of all the VIPs?" Katsuragi pressed him, but he sounded cautious.

"Why would you ever doubt me, Katsuragi? Of course, I do." Ryuuen was purposely acting like he wasn't convincing, but Katsuragi couldn't ignore his words.

"I'm prepared to give you the money. What I need are class points."

"Alright, alright. I get it already. It's not like I care that much about class points anyway... But things have changed Katsuragi. I want 200,000 private points on top of the 500,000. If you can do



that, I'd be willing to give you one name."

"That's fine," Katsuragi replied without much thought.

Ryuuen's grin widened.

"Kobashi Yume, Class C. She's the VIP from the Cow Group." His eyes turned sharp, similar to that of a snake who caught its prey. "We've already talked about the details of the contract. There wouldn't be any merit in me betraying you. If I gave you the wrong name, two things will happen. First, I would be helping Class B and C indirectly, which I wouldn't do. And second, I'd be required to pay you 1,000,000 private points in exchange for the 50 class points that you'd lose."

It was almost a death sentence. The condition against Ryuuen would've been disastrous if he chose to mislead Katsuragi into triggering Outcome #4. Even if the VIP turned out to be from Class D and Ryuuen gets the 500,000 private points from the person, he would still need to pay another 500,000 from his own pocket to make the million.

Normally, a contract with such specific conditions wouldn't be validated by the school. However, they weren't doing anything to manipulate the results and force a winning outcome for one or two classes.

If Ryuuen was right, it could be passed off as a lucky guess. If Ryuuen was wrong and the VIP was another student from Class B or C, they wouldn't know. And if the VIP was from Class D, it means Katsuragi was deceived but Ryuuen would have to pay the price.

"Hmph. 700,000 private points, is it? If that's the only change that you wish for, then so be it. I'll have the contract ready soon." Katsuragi nodded lightly before asking another question. "I'm curious about the VIPs from Class B."

"Don't bother. They're mine."

"Then how about Class A's VIPs? If you really figured it out... then, of course, you'd know who they are, right?" Katsuragi's voice was stern and powerful. It was the question that plagued his mind ever since Ryuuen made him believe that the VIPs' names were in his hands.

"Kukuku... Don't be scared now. It's true that I could easily steal 150 points from your class and use the money to pay the fine for misleading you with the Cow Group, but I won't do that." Ryuuen shrugged with his arms relaxed to the side. "You don't have to worry about me turning on you, Katsuragi. I have no intention of submitting any names from Class A. I can assure you that."

Ryuuen turned around and began walking away.

How did Ryuuen figure everything out in the first place? That was the main question earlier, but it hardly mattered now.



Katsuragi's mind was clouded with new sets of questions. If he was in Ryuuen's position, he wouldn't hesitate to put the names of every VIP from the other classes. He also knew that Ryuuen wasn't the kind of person who'd pass up on that chance.

In other words, his decision to leave Class A out was illogical.

"Why? You're planning something, aren't you?" Katsuragi asked with a slight glare.

Ryuuen turned around to give him a side glance.

"Oh, please. Learn how to trust your allies sometimes, Katsuragi. I'm not scheming anything against you this time. I gave you a name and you'll give me the money after you trigger Outcome #3. That's it. And with me ignoring Class A's VIPs? Let's just say that I'm feeling a bit merciful."

As Katsuragi looked at Ryuuen's fading figure, all he could do was hope that he was telling the truth. He was already busy monitoring the potential traitors within Class A. Even with his great intellect, Katsuragi hasn't figured out what the pattern was. With only 3 names to work with, he's just as behind as the other classes.

If so... just how did Ryuuen figure out the code...?

*Author's Notes:*

*Haruka's unfavorable impression of Ichihashi and her group is canon.*

*In Japan, 3D, VR, or CG are often called 2.5D. Consequently, real life is the one that's referred to as 3D.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 8.2 - Ideal Results

2nd Day, 8:00 PM.

*[The fourth group discussion begins now.]*

"Anyone up for a game?" asked Ichinose. "Katsuragi-kun, Ryuuen-kun, if you're not interested in having a discussion, why not join us for some card games?"

"I'll pass." Katsuragi gently refused before looking at his classmates. "You can join in if you want."

"We're fine with just chilling here, Katsuragi-kun," replied Matoba.

Yano and Nishikawa nodded in agreement.

"Maybe later, Ichinose. I have some business with Class A, after all."

Ryuuen purposefully set off Class B and C's alarm meters.

"Oh? What kind of business?" Ichinose's smile didn't disappear, but her eyes narrowed into a sharp stare.

"Heh. We're not in some kind of spy movie, so you don't have to play dumb. It's obviously about the exam," he replied.

"Alright, since you want to get straight to the point, I'll just ask you directly. Are you planning something with Class A?"

"Of course, I am. But if you want to know the specifics, go ask Katsuragi."

Ryuuen didn't feel afraid at all. He casually revealed his motives to everyone. All of us reflexively turned towards the calm Katsuragi.

"I'm not obliged to tell you anything. Class B and Class C are already colluding, anyway."

"Hm, I guess that's fair. But you're not so dumb as to give him the names of Class A's VIPs, right?" asked Horikita.

"I was inclined to say nothing at first, but I've taken that as an insult, Horikita. I'm not careless enough to make that mistake. Are you looking down on me?" replied Katsuragi.

"I see. I apologize, then. My statement was influenced by your blunder during the island exam,"

Oi, oi, is a fight about to break out...?

"If things are gonna be the same as our previous discussions, then so be it." Ichinose mediated the situation in an instant. "Let's just spend the hour in a fun way, as per usual. It wasn't my intention to force Class A or D into doing anything."



"Now, now. Even if we're in the same group, a conflict of interests would be inevitable. I think it's fine if we just mind our own businesses without any troubles." Hirata backed her up without much delay.

"Maybe everyone's interested in playing a different game? We can look something up on the internet!" followed Kikyuu.

In the end, we spent our time frolicking around with the cards. However, before the hour-long meeting ended, we decided to talk about the exam.

"How's your progress with the pattern, Horikita-san...?" asked Ichinose. "We only have three names, so it's still pretty hard to notice any patterns."

"I'll be honest. Despite having four names to work with, it's not that easy to find a pattern. The assigned students should have something in common for them to be chosen... but I still can't find what that is," replied Horikita.

"I'm surprised that you're just as stuck, Ichinose-san. One of our hypotheses is that the VIP is decided based on something that only the person or the people close to them knows. So we thought that one requirement was to *know* the VIP," said Hirata.

"We've thought about that as well. However, even if I was close friends with everyone in my class, I still can't find the common factor that made them the VIP..." answered Ichinose.

"That's right. As things stand, the exam might just end in a stalemate. Of course, I'm worried about Ryuuken's sudden team-up with Class A, but if we're betting on Katsuragi's resolve to not reveal their VIPs, then no one should figure out the pattern soon," said Kanzaki.

"What do you think, Kiyotaka-kun?" asked Kikyuu.

"Hmm... I think Horikita can win this race. Having another name is a huge advantage, after all," I replied.

"I think I agree with you..." said Ichinose. "If that happens, then I'd be glad about your accomplishment. And although it's certainly troublesome for our class, please don't hesitate to submit the names of our VIPs. After all, I would certainly do the same if I find the pattern. In the end, we're all doing this for the sake of our class."

"..."

My classmates couldn't respond to Ichinose's genuine words. Even Kanzaki and Tsube didn't rebuke her. *"If you figure out the pattern, please don't target our class."* Even if we were in an alliance, Ichinose Honami would never make such a selfish request when she had nothing to give back. Horikita would've figured out the pattern using fair means, and her classmates understood that.

"How about another proposal then?" I spoke up.



I'll offer my last bit of help to Ichinose.

"Ayanokouji-kun?" Horikita muttered my name.

"A proposal?"

"This is in conjunction with what my prediction of the results is going to be."

All of them started to listen attentively. Through the course of the exam, I never really contributed much apart from getting Minamikata's name from Kouenji. So coming out with a "*prediction*" should be quite surprising.

"This is under the impression that Ryuen has figured out the code already."

Apart from Horikita, all of them appeared shocked.

"Ryuen-kun...?" muttered Kikyou.

"Did you believe what he told us from before, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Horikita.

"We can't be too complacent. What if Katsuragi was lying and he already gave away Class A's VIPs in exchange for Ryuen not targeting his class?"

"That's a big possibility. Katsuragi-kun has the luxury to ignore gaining class points. In return, he'd cooperate with Ryuen-kun to take our classes down. Since Class D's position isn't a threat to Class A, he would be satisfied with giving away VIPs to Ryuen-kun as long as our class points get cut down," mused Ichinose.

"But one thing doesn't add up. If you Ryuen really knew about the VIPs, why wouldn't he finish us off the moment he figured out the pattern?" Kanzaki contemplated with a grave expression.

"He told us his reason, right Horikita?"

"According to Ryuen-kun, *"I'm still having fun playing around"...*" answered Horikita.

"That's quite unreasonable, isn't it?" Hirata commented with a bitter smile.

"It is unreasonable. That's why I'm inclined to pass it off as a bluff. But still..." replied Horikita.

Then again, Ryuen was known for being unreasonable. Everyone thought of that, especially after the island exam.

"Well then, this is where my proposal comes in. The purpose of this plan is to act as a countermeasure against Ryuen's attack. However, this requires Horikita to figure out the code before the exam ends. Then, we'll secretly submit our answers before Ryuen does," I explained. "It will have similar details with our previous contract. If Ryuen submits the last two VIPs from Class C, you guys will lose 100 class points. For that, we'll give you two VIPs from Class D."

"Then we'll get back the 100 class points that we lost, huh? If



you're mirroring our previous deal, you'll give us the two names in exchange for the two 500,000 private point-rewards, right?" asked Ichinose.

"Yes," I nodded. "After our previous contract is complete, we'll also have two targets left for Ryuen. Our class will lose 100 class points, too. However, if this plan succeeds, we'll have three VIPs from Class A plus the other VIP from Class D. We'll gain an additional 100 class points as a result while Class A loses 150 class points. It's a win-win situation for our classes, isn't it?"

"So you've arranged this plan to help Class C hold their ground. At the same time, we'll surpass Class A while obtaining large amounts of private points..." Horikita summarized my plan beautifully.

"Yep. To be honest, it's the second-most ideal outcome overall. We're still working on nothing but assumptions and speculations. If you figure out the code and it turned out that Ryuen didn't know who the VIPs are, Class B would gain 200 class points while Class C would gain 100. That's the best result we could hope for."

"But in order to do that, Class B would need to figure out the pattern," said Kanzaki.

It all comes down to that.

"Yep. So in the end, our victory is still up to you three, especially you, Horikita," I nodded.

If Horikita can work better together with Hirata and Kikyou, they might get an answer sooner. Regardless, I believe they'd deliver good results before the exam ends.

*\*Beep\**

As soon as I finished explaining everything, my phone vibrated twice in succession. When I checked, two people have sent me a message.

*(20:59) [Ayanokouji, it seems like Manabe and her friends are planning something.]*

Yukimura was the sender of this message. I see... Them acting now was within the range of my expectations, though I expected them to act tomorrow during the rest day.

*(20:59) [You don't have to follow them. Karuizawa's not in trouble. This is all part of our plan.]*

Of course, that was a lie, but I can't afford to have him around.

*(20:59) [Help.]*

A single word. This was Karuizawa's message for me.

I glanced at Hirata and saw him looking at his phone. Karuizawa must've sent him a similar message.

"I'll go," I said.

Hirata nodded in reply. When my phone's clock hit 21:00, I



immediately stood up and ran out of the room.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 8.3 - Parasite

I sprinted out of the Dragon Group's room with haste.

"Oh-? Ayanokouji-kun-?"

I briefly ran past Hoshinomiya-sensei who seemed to be approaching our room. The contract must've been completed and she was going to deliver it to Ichinose.

Students started going out of their respective rooms. Since the hallway was wide, I didn't bump into anyone despite the speed that I was going at. Yukimura messaged me about what he knew. It seemed like Manabe and her friends took Karuizawa to the emergency stairwell.

Good. It was the only detail that I needed, anyway.

After telling Yukimura to retreat, I gave him and Hamaguchi some instructions to meet up with Ichinose. I'll leave the explanations up to her.

I reached the dark corner on the way to the emergency exit. It was obvious that something was about to happen. Since the elevators weren't crowded, there was no reason to be here. I slowly entered the small hallway and saw the door to the emergency stairwell.

*\*Ka-chak\**

And now it's shut.

I sneaked up to the door and found four female students. They were visible from the small, circular glass window.

Three of them were Manabe Shiho, Yamashita Saki, and Yabu Nanami. They surrounded my friend and classmate; Karuizawa Kei.

Karuizawa and I got along pretty well. It might've been brought on by my knowledge of her past. However, she had Hirata, so we never really got a chance to become closer. Sure, we've gone out to eat with her group many times, but her attention was mostly focused on Hirata for obvious reasons.

I was busy leading the class, and she was busy leading the girls while increasing her reputation for self-protection.

Karuizawa has done a fine job with all of that... However...

"Hey, why'd you bring me to a place like this?!" she protested.

"Stop playing dumb. You did push Rika, didn't you? Start talking." Manabe interrogated her with a glare.

"H-Huh? I already told you, you've got the wrong person!"



The three of them surrounded Karuizawa, forcing her against the wall. She was cornered and had no escape. Yet despite this, Karuizawa offered no apologies. She continued to deny their allegations which would make a normal person consider her innocence.

"Look, I have plans later. Can you please move?" asked Karuizawa.

"Sure, but we'll have to finish up our business first. Let's confirm it right now. I'm going to call Rika and if we really have the wrong person, you're free to go. We'll even apologize for causing you some inconvenience."

Manabe's confident tone meant that she already confirmed things with Morofuji in advance. Karuizawa's eyebrows twitched a little. She's panicking.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'll call the teacher."

"And what will you tell the teacher, exactly? It's not like we're being violent with you or anything. Besides, we can also rat you out when that happens. We'll say you pushed Rika, and regardless of whether the truth is revealed, you'll still get in trouble."

Anyone could guess that Karuizawa's mind is in turmoil, but she was doing a great job at hiding it. Since the other side had no intention of backing down, she had no choice but to try escaping. However, the girls managed to grab her arm and she was pushed up against the wall. One of them took out their phone, probably to call Morofuji.

Seeing this, Karuizawa knew that it was checkmate.

"W-Wait!" she pleaded.

"What? Why should we wait?"

"I just remembered something. I bumped into that girl before."

It was a downward spiral from here.

There was no doubt about it. Driven by panic, Karuizawa's head is now a mess. Her words started to become incongruent and the girls picked up on that immediately.

"You're a total liar. You remembered her from the very beginning, didn't you? Well, whatever. So, are you going to apologize to Rika properly?"

Spite? Pride? Denial? Whatever it was, Karuizawa's response sealed the deal for Manabe and her friends' resolve to vent out their anger and envy.

"No way. She was in the wrong. She's a complete airhead."

Karuizawa knew that her words would upset them more, but she also knew that admitting her fault wouldn't do much. If she took responsibility for her mistakes in this specific manner, her reputation will be shattered, and there's a high chance that things



won't stop even after an apology. That's why Karuizawa chose the other route. She'd rather tread the road of broken glass than give them what they want.

"You're seriously pissing us off. We might've forgiven you if you'd actually apologized to Rika. But now, we definitely won't forgive you."

Manabe pressed down on her shoulder. Karuizawa's eyes were shaky, but she still managed to give her a glare.

"Whatever. You probably never planned on forgiving me, anyway."

Karuizawa was smart enough to notice that from the start. After she spat those words, Yamashita and Yabu lost their patience and spoke.

"Shiho-chan, I've had enough. Karuizawa's unforgivable."

"I know, right? She should understand exactly how Rika felt. Why don't we bully her for real?"

"Good idea," smirked Manabe.

She struck Karuizawa's shoulder with a little extra force.

"Agh-!" Karuizawa staggered back and nearly lost her balance.

"Ahh... Hah..."

She was panting in suffocation and held her head as if she was in pain.

"Oh, please. Act as girly as you want. We're still not going to forgive you."

She was strong-headed alright, but her current behavior doesn't add up. That's why I can confirm it with an 80% guarantee now. Karuizawa's past as a victim of bullying was indeed the truth.

However, this may or may not be a part of a facade that I'm not seeing. Was she waiting for a perfect opportunity to counter them physically? Did she call some of her other friends in advance and is trying to buy time until they arrive? Who knows? Let's see how things develop.

They grabbed Karuizawa's hair and forcefully yanked her head up.

"I've always hated your face, Karuizawa. I mean, don't you girls think she's just butt-ugly?"

"Yeah, for sure. Don't you just want to cut her face?"

Karuizawa's expression contorted in fear.

"S-Stop it... Stop it..."

"S-Stop it", she says. What happened to your big attitude?"

Manabe and her friends' insecurities were obvious. They envied Karuizawa, and in turn, hated her. In terms of looks, Karuizawa had them all beat. So of course, you'd want to tear off your enemy's advantages. They wanted to turn Karuizawa's pretty face into a



pathetic display of snot and tears, probably even planning to take some pictures of it.

She was afraid and on the verge of crying. The three girls noticed this, and with their frightening intuition, they arrived at the worst possible conclusion.

"Hey, Shiho-chan. Isn't this weird...? Karuizawa doesn't look like she's acting."

"Yeah, is she really that scared?"

Under normal circumstances, a girl of Karuizawa's temperament would bite back with an angry expression while hurling curses at them. But right now, she was nothing but a terrified little girl.

At that moment, the three of them thought of the same thing.

"Ohh? So that's how it is. You were bullied in the past, weren't you, Karuizawa?"

"Wha--?!"

The past that she desperately buried came creeping back at her.

"Woah, would you look at that! I hit the nail in the head!"

"Yeah, seriously?"

"Wow... And now she's trying to act high and mighty? Isn't that, like, pathetic?"

Karuizawa's reaction gave it away. And now, I was also 100% sure that the general contents of her past were true. Manabe and the other two started mocking her. The tears that welled up around her eyes started to flow.

"Geez, you should at least know your place, you bitch. You had the gull to hurt others when in truth, you're just a coward?"

"Maybe you need to reminisce about your past so you won't act like a bitch again."

"N-No... That's not true! You're wrong!" They had the strongest possible psychological weapon in hand. Karuizawa's weak retaliation didn't matter to them.

"Heh. Why don't you get down on your knees then? You're good at groveling on the ground, right? Maybe you'd even plaster your forehead on the floor while begging for forgiveness."

"I-I won't!"

One of them grabbed her hair with force.

"Ugh-"

"Aww... Look at that miserable face. It would be a shame to..."

*\*Slap\**

She slapped Karuizawa's face before finishing her sentence.

"Agh-! L-Let me go!"

Hmm... I can't let this go on any further or my plan wouldn't work.

"Woah, let me in on it, too!" said the other girl.



I opened the door before another slap can connect.

"Alright, why don't we stop it right here?" I said in a fairly loud voice.

"What--?!"

Obviously, all of them looked surprised.

"Ayanokouji-ku--"

"Stay silent for a bit, Karuizawa. That's not part of the *script*."

"Hah? Script? What the hell are you talking about?" asked Manabe.

I raised my phone and showed them the screen. A video of all the events up to the first slap was playing with very clear audio.

"You walked right into our trap. Now you're in really deep trouble."

They immediately understood the hell that awaited them. The three girls stepped back in disbelief.

"W-What...? So you were just acting all along?" Yamashita turned to Karuizawa, who was wiping the tears off of her face.

"Huh? Of course, I was. Did you seriously think that I, of all people, would have such a past?" Karuizawa responded instantly.

Perfect. Now that the situation was completely in her favor, Karuizawa got back on her feet once more... Or at least, that's what I wanted to say. Since Manabe and her friends were panicking, they failed to notice the lingering damage they dealt on her psyche. Karuizawa's hands were still trembling in anxiety.

"Tch. What the hell?! This is crazy!"

"Everything was going smoothly, but I never expected you to slap our actress, so I had to step in. You guys have gone too far."

They couldn't say anything at this point. Everything was caught on camera. Denying their actions would be pointless.

"Why... are you doing this? We were just..." Manabe tried to justify their actions, but she immediately realized how carried away they got.

"Karuizawa kicked your friend out of a line, and you're trying to stand up for her. I'm not against that at all... But this isn't about that anymore, is it? You were just trying to take your insecurities and frustrations out on her. It became very clear with the contents of your insults and acts of violence."

"This... This wouldn't have happened if she just apologized!" snapped Manabe.

"And that's exactly why we made this plan. Karuizawa and I never believed that you'd stop harassing her even after she apologized. And looking at the results, it seems like our gut feeling was right," I said. "Karuizawa intended to apologize from the start, but you were hounding her with blatant hostility. If she apologizes to Morofuji,



you'd think you're the ones who pushed her over. And when the news spreads, it will stain her reputation."

Karuizawa looked surprised, but since the other three were looking at me, they never noticed her reaction.

"Karuizawa will apologize of her own free will because she felt bad, and the three of you would have nothing to do with it. After she patches things up with Morofuji, that'll be the end of it. This video will act as a countermeasure should you bother her even after that."

They understood what I wanted to say. I won't use the footage unless I needed to. That said, saying that Karuizawa will apologize should ease their animosity.

"Before you go, I want you to apologize. You hurt Karuizawa way more than she hurt your friend."

I was the person who held absolute power in this situation. They had no choice but to oblige.

"Sorry..."

The three of them were reluctant but sincere. They still hated Karuizawa's guts, but my words made them realize their hypocrisy.

"..." Karuizawa could only receive their apologies in silence.

To be honest, I couldn't have asked for a better response from her.

"Don't worry. I'm not trying to be a villain here. If Karuizawa didn't intend to apologize, I'd be siding with you three instead."

Manabe Shiho, Yabu Namami, and Yamashita Saki walked away with gloomy expressions and heavy steps. After the three of them left, Karuizawa's legs finally gave out.

I looked at her with cold eyes, and that's when she realized that I wasn't here to celebrate with her. I slowly approached the confused and frightened girl.

"Do you understand now, Karuizawa?"

"W-What...?"

"You're the one who caused this. You just reaped what you sowed."

"I..."

"But don't worry. Even though it came at a price, Manabe and her friends will never bother you again. I managed to keep your past buried under wraps, too," I said.

Karuizawa couldn't respond immediately. She kept staring at me with a puzzled and intimidated look on her face.

"Are you... really Ayanokouji-kun...?" she asked.

"Ah... That's right. This should be the first time that I've talked to you like this."

Karuizawa desperately tried to wrap her head around the



"me" that was standing right in front of her. My actions had been cruel and my words were cold. It was completely different from the silent yet friendly Ayanokouji Kiyotaka that she knew.

"You've started acting a bit gloomier ever since the midterm exam, but..."

"I've never really acted this way towards anyone, apart from a few people. I can understand that you're surprised." I glanced at her face with a small sigh. "Sorry, Karuizawa. I'm not the nice and thoughtful class leader that everyone knew. Even Hirata is not aware of this 'me'."

Karuizawa's pupils quivered. She was starting to comprehend the situation... and the real Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

"Yeah... You just watched as they tormented me earlier. You didn't really care even if they got more violent, did you? However, they'll get suspicious of your plan if you let me get hit more than once. That's probably the only reason why you stopped them after I got slapped." Karuizawa replied with a self-deprecating laugh.

If Karuizawa gets psychologically crippled, she might not be able to recover even after I revealed myself. If that happens, Manabe and her friends wouldn't believe that she was just acting. Since I didn't know the extent of what I can allow, I immediately stepped in after the first act of violence.

Amazing. As soon as I showed her my cruel self, Karuizawa deduced the true nature of my plan.

"That's right. To me, it was the fastest and most effective way to solve your problem. You can resent me if you want. I can accept that."

The only thing she could do was turn away with a conflicted look.

"This wouldn't have started if you didn't do anything in the first place. You know that, right?"

"I-I couldn't help it! My friends were all there..."

"And because they were there, you put on a show strength by preying on the weak? Isn't that a bit hypocritical?"

Karuizawa looked down as she bit her lip.

"I understand that you're just trying to protect yourself. That's why I even helped with your plan to go out with Hirata. But do you remember what I said back then? I told you to *not create trouble*."

"I..."

"You're probably aware of it already, but you're just acting like the ones who bullied you in the past-- like Manabe and her group. Is that really how you want to protect yourself, Karuizawa?"

"I didn't know what else I could do... Whenever I emulate what they did, it worked. It just became a habit."



This utter desperation to protect one's self didn't make sense.

I stared straight into Karuizawa's eyes, trying to look for that one missing detail. She held her head, once again. But I lightly grabbed her chin, forcing her to lock eyes with me. She was broken, down to the depths of despair. What happened? I needed to know.

"Karuizawa, there's something strange about all this."

"Strange...? What are you talking about?" Her body started to tremble involuntarily.

"I don't know... But *you* should."

"N-No..."

A morbid memory has resurfaced from the depths of her mind. Karuizawa's eyes started to tear up once more. She's repulsed by that certain memory with every fiber of her being.

"You've been bullied since you were young, so I can see where you're coming from. You've relayed all of your horrible experiences to me and Hirata, so we can at least sympathize with you and assist you... But that's not all, is it? Why are you so desperate about gaining power to protect yourself? You value your current position more than anything else, right? If someone got a hold of the information about your past, you'd do anything to make them keep it, wouldn't you?"

Karuizawa has suffered a lot in the past. They'd put tacks in her shoes and fill her desk with roadkill. They'd vandalize her stuff, steal them, or even destroy them. They wrote things like "*whore*" or "*slut*" on her uniform. Even the bathroom was hell for her since she'd get splashed with murky water all the time. Karuizawa was bullied everyday. She suffered everyday, but she never quit school. Such a strong girl would need to go through something more inimical to be this desperate.

"T-That's right... I'll do anything..." Karuizawa gasped for air as she forced out an answer.

"And that's why I came to the conclusion that you're still hiding something."

"That's..."

"What is it, Karuizawa? A darker form of your suffering, perhaps?"

Karuizawa clenched her chest which severely crumpled the fabric of her uniform. Like before, she was having a hard time breathing. She looked down as her eyes instinctively wandered towards her left side.

I touched that part of her body, over her uniform, without missing a beat.

"S-Stop-!" Karuizawa almost yelled on reflex, but she managed to stop her voice from getting loud.



At the same time, she clutched my hand and tried to move it away. I grabbed her uniform and pulled it up. There, on her silky white skin, was a grotesque scar. It was a deep scar caused by a deliberate yet amateur cut, executed using a very sharp blade.

"U-Ugh...!"

I traced my finger over that scar.

"This is it? This is your darkness?"

"W-Why..."

Something like this could not have been brought on by simple bullying. Her scar was the result of a life-threatening physical assault. Karuizawa Kei was burdened with such a past, and this scar imprinted those dreadful memories onto her, permanently.

"I've known you for a long time now, Karuizawa. You've had traumatic experiences with bullying, but you still held on. You're tenacious. That's why it's always been a mystery to me. What shattered your spirit? What could make such a strong girl so desperate for protection?"

So this was the reason.

I spoke softly to the point where it can be considered whispering. However, because our faces were very close to each other, Karuizawa understood each and every word that I said.

And that's when our dark eyes met. Ah, there it is. That's a familiar-looking pair of eyes. They're the kind of eyes that has seen what true darkness and despair is.

People who carry darkness are attracted to each other. Karuizawa, Kikyuu, Hirata-- they've all been exposed to it at some point in their lives. All of them were putting up a front to conceal the truth, but they were slowly eroding themselves. Ironically, that is also the reason why they can readily embrace the darkness of others.

Even though she was hateful and paranoid, Kikyuu entrusted herself to me after and I showed her who I am. Hirata must've had something that made him everyone's altruistic hero, and he vowed to tell me everything after getting a sense of my true mindset. And of course, I've forcefully freed Karuizawa from the shackles of her hideous past.

"Who... are you...?" she asked with trembling lips.

"I'm the same as you... if that's what you wanted to hear."

My words were true to some degree. However, there are things in this world that are profoundly darker. Even Karuizawa was not aware of them just yet.

She sat in a kneeling position, so I bent my knees and crouched to her level.

"Now that I've gained a new level of understanding of your



situation, I'm not sure if Hirata would be enough to protect you."

"Hirata-kun...?"

"He's everyone's ally. That's why he's not useful when things escalate to this level, at least not for--"

"A parasite like me?" The darkness in Karuizawa's eyes swirled as she wallowed in self-deprecation.

"Yeah, a parasite like you won't survive by latching on to a host like Hirata."

Karuizawa's eyes indicated her discordant thoughts.

"Don't worry, I'll be working closely with you from now on. However, you have to stop hiding things from me-- only then can I truly help you." Karuizawa understood the value of my words. Regardless of what happened, I produced results. "I'm not the right person to reprimand you. I did something detestable too-- letting you suffer through most of your trauma tonight. However, I can call you out for targeting some of the girls in our class."

She gazed down with a guilty look.

"They're my friends. Even if I don't have a problem with your way of things, you should tone it down a bit. You're the leader of Class B's girls. If anything, you should be the one who'll stand up for them-- the one they can rely on."

Karuizawa silently listened. She reflected on herself while burying her face on her knees. I silently accompanied her until I felt something inside my pocket.

I stood up and took my phone out.

"Are you leaving...?" she asked.

"Not yet. First, I'm going to 'save' you."

"What...?"

After pressing the send button, I sat back in silence beside Karuizawa. A few seconds passed before, our phones vibrated simultaneously. She took hers out and read the notification.

*[The test has now ended for the Rabbit Group. Those in the Rabbit Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

"Eh-?"

For Class B, the only people who knew about the plan were the four members of the Dragon Group. Karuizawa's confusion was understandable.

"We made a deal with Ichinose. In exchange for the 500,000 private points, I sold out one of our VIPs. I gave her your name so the Rabbit Group members won't have to meet up with each other again," I explained. "Don't worry, you'll still get your money."

After I received a copy of the contract from Ichinose, I sent Karuizawa's name to Hamaguchi.



I checked my phone after feeling another vibration.

[Karuizawa.]

Hamaguchi forwarded his answer to me. Excellent. It seems like everything went well.

"I see... You can't let Hirata-kun know about how you made me endure their bullying, so you ended the Rabbit Group's test, using it as an alibi. At the same time, you fulfilled whatever deal you had with Class C..." Karuizawa chuckled bitterly. "You easily killed two birds with a single stone. I guess that's to be expected from you."

Karuizawa was quick on the uptake. But the reason I saved her and ended the test wasn't for that purpose only. I also needed another accomplice to complete everything.

"You're right, but I actually wanted to kill three birds. I have one more job for you, Karuizawa."

2nd Day, 9:34 PM.

Karuizawa and I walked out to the main hallway and found a handful of freshmen and employees strolling around the 2nd deck. Around this time, most of the students were already having dinner or resting inside their respective rooms.

With everything settled, the two of us sauntered towards the elevator.

"Sorry about all this..." she said.

"You don't need to apologize to me. I did something horrible to you, you know?"

"Hmm... If it weren't for your plan, I wouldn't be able to realize how unnecessarily destructive my actions have been. In the end, you saved me, and I'm grateful for that."

This time, I was the one who could only respond with silence.

Karuizawa Kei's secret was kept safe, and I also found out the whole truth about her past. I don't know what that means for the both of us, but she might've turned out to be an ally that I can trust to some degree-- or at least, that's what I feel.

*Author's Notes:*

*The manga did a great job of showcasing Kei's scar, so I used it.*

*Kiyotaka hasn't realized it yet, but he instinctively trusts certain people. Those people are the ones who accept his messed-up real self. Kei and Kikyuu are on the same level right now. However, Kei will slowly surpass her because Kiyotaka is aware that Kikyuu still doesn't fully*



*trust him. Of course, Kikyou may or may not take the lead again if she decides to trust Kiyotaka completely.*



## SS.19 - Karuizawa Kei: What Resides Within Us

What did I expect after coming to this school?

Did I expect things to change? What even is the "*change*" that I wanted?

The girls and boys probably dislike me for my attitude. Similarly, my peers didn't like me back then, so I got bullied. Both of which were my fault, to begin with.

Aren't things the same then?

Strictly speaking, they're not. This time, I'm doing everything I can to protect myself. And so far, I've succeeded.

However, if my past as a severely bullied weakling is revealed, everything I've built on will shatter in an instant.

Well, it's not like I cared too much about my reputation, but the protective shell I've created alongside it would also be destroyed. No matter what happens, I can't let that happen.

"Sigh..."

I turned off the shower while fending off the disruptive thoughts.

I got out of the bath and stood in front of the mirror, completely naked.

"-!!!"

I look at my side and the sight of my disgusting scar made me nauseous. I gripped the faucet in fear as I vomited.

The events from that incident were vivid enough to make me remember everything in detail. My hideous past isn't something that I can run away from.

For the longest time, I knew that this sanctuary was temporary. And with my past slowly creeping up from behind, I can only imagine the hell waiting for me.

"Ohh? So that's how it is. You were bullied in the past, weren't you, Karuizawa?"

The moment I heard those words, I knew my life was over.

Everything will return to how it was back in middle school. Tormented, ridiculed, and laughed at. Some might pity me, and



some might lend a helping hand, but everything would be over for me. The Karuizawa Kei that I wanted to be will be nothing but a pipe dream now.

My weak denials didn't go through them.

My pathetic pleas overjoyed them.

Ahh, how familiar.

I wonder what kind of eyes I have right now.

My body was instinctively crying, trying its best to combat the hell moving forward. Maybe, just maybe, there's still a way to convince them. Even though my heart was as good as empty, my tears still flowed while my voice cried out. It was a futile effort for my inevitable suffering.

*\*Slap\**

I got slapped across the face. It doesn't look like she's used to slapping considering how weak it was.

I'm sure the other two will take their turns. After that, they'll probably escalate their violence to punches, then kicks. All of that while berating me and mocking me.

This is the worst... I just want to die--

I feel suffocated. My mind was miserable and my heart had collapsed in despair.

But... when I thought everything was over, he appeared.

"Alright, why don't we stop it right here?"

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. He was Class B's enigmatic leader.

He was the sole reason for our class's current position. Ayanokouji-kun led the class with ease, using the capable students effectively to turn things around. He predicted that I would lead the girls and even helped me with my plan to date Hirata-kun.

He was amazing and I admired him from a distance.

If it weren't for my relationship with Hirata-kun, I would try my best to become closer to him. It's not like I liked him or anything like that, but my interest in him grew day by day.

When he purchased the explanation from Chabashira-sensei way back in April, I thought I was hearing things out of a manga. While we were too busy gawking at our monthly allowance, Ayanokouji-kun uncovered the truth without much difficulty. He thought up a plan to ensure that no one would fail during our midterm exams, too.

His achievements were amazing-- something that no ordinary student could even compare to. *"Why is he in Class D?"* was a question that's been on my mind ever since.

I observed him from afar. I immediately realized that he was just trying to fit in. Even though it wasn't really obvious because of his face, Ayanokouji would always try his best to return a conversation.



He told me that it would be nice if he was friends with everyone in the class. It was a really endearing wish. It only took four months before he fulfilled his wish. Well, most of the girls want him as a boyfriend rather than a friend, though.

Despite everything, I also noticed some subtle changes in Ayanokouji-kun's behavior. His innocent air, which resembled that of a baby chick, slowly disappeared. His words got more and more direct, almost cold at times.

My image of him completely shifted when he rescued Sakura-san. He was cunning and smart. Calling him a genius wasn't an exaggeration given his grades. He was extremely athletic, too. However, he never came off as someone who'd fight using fists. Everyone in our class saw him as *"harmless"*.

We were wrong.

The way he beat up Sakura-san's assailant told me that Ayanokouji-kun knew what he was doing. At first, his strength wasn't apparent, but I realized how strong he was when he punched out the teeth out of the man.

Ayanokouji-kun's expression also sent chills down my spine. His boring and gloomy face looked cold and unforgiving. At first glance, nothing seemed to change. But if I was on the receiving end of that look, who knows how frightened I would feel?

"You were the one who caused this. You just reaped what you sowed."

He threw those words right to my face without any hesitation. He saved me, but he also wanted to teach me a lesson. That's why he watched for a while before acting.

It was extremely cold. He let me suffer through all that and after making Manabe and her friends leave, he didn't even ask me if I was okay. Yes, it was cold, but it was also logical. Through his plan, my past wouldn't be used against me. It was ultimately for my own good. I know that. But he was one of my closest friends. So seeing him talk and look at me like this still hurt.

However, I also knew that I had no right to get hurt.

"You're probably aware of it already, but you're just acting like the ones who bullied you in the past-- like Manabe and her friends. Is that really how you want to protect yourself, Karuizawa?"

I was weak, so the strong preyed on me. And now that I appeared strong, I also had to prey on other weak people to maintain that appearance. I knew it would make others dislike me, but I didn't care. I was desperate to protect myself-- to prevent *"that"* from happening again.

"--you're still hiding something."

If anyone would notice, it would be him.



"What is it, Karuizawa? A darker form of your suffering, perhaps?"

The suffocating sensation returned. My eyes wandered towards the location of my scar.

I realized how fatal of a mistake that was, but it was too late. Ayanokouji-kun touched that spot in an instant.

I tried to move his hand away, but it was futile. He lifted my uniform and saw "it"-- the disgusting scar that I'd been hiding from the start.

I was severely bullied in the past. They would pull down my skirt in front of the class. They would make me confess to a boy that I never liked. They would also make me lick their shoes. All of that among other things.

They were all true, and both Ayanokouji-kun and Hirata-kun knew about them.

But this? I didn't want anyone to know about this. Not even them. I can't even bear to look at it. If people saw this stomach-churning scar, they would cringe in disgust, just like me.

"This is it? This is your darkness?"

Ayanokouji-kun's face didn't change in the slightest. He even went so far as to trace his fingers along the shape of my scar.

Was it because of the tension? Was his mind too occupied with knowing the truth? Regardless of the reason, he didn't look at me nor the scar with revulsion. It made me feel something that I didn't know how to explain.

"What shattered your spirit? What could make such a strong girl so desperate for protection?"

*"So this was the reason,"* he must be thinking.

His soft voice echoed inside my head.

When our dark eyes met, I knew that Ayanokouji-kun had also been through some things that a single person wouldn't be able to handle alone. I was curious, but my entire body was overcome with fear. I can't even think straight. At that moment, I was terrified of him.

Those were the eyes of someone who had witnessed more despair and darkness that a normal person couldn't possibly imagine. Or at least, that's what my trembling body was telling me.

"Who... are you?"

He told me that we were the same... Ahh, that's probably why he was the perfect person to embrace my darkness-- not my friends, not Hirata-kun.

"A parasite like you won't survive by latching on to a host like Hirata."

Ayanokouji-kun knew that, too. That's why Hirata-kun wasn't the



one who could help me. I needed someone who'd be an ally to me and only me.

"I'm not the right person to reprimand you. I did something detestable too-- letting you suffer through most of your trauma tonight. However, I can call you out for targeting some of the girls in our class."

I looked down with a guilty expression.

"They're my friends. Even if I don't have a problem with your way of things, you should tone it down a bit. You're the leader of Class B's girls. If anything, you should be the one who'll stand up for them-- the one they can rely on."

He preached to me from the perspective of an ordinary classmate, which was probably what I needed at the moment.

He made me hear how hypocritical I have been, and how damaging my actions were to some of our classmates. It was awful-- I was awful.

*"But I had to do it"--* that's what I've been telling myself.

I've bullied the innocent and weak girls in my class. Most of them were from Kushida-san's group. One part of me felt bad while the other part felt annoyed. They reminded me of how I was back then. Luckily, they had friends to lean their backs against. Even Sakurasan, who couldn't even talk to anyone back then made friends with the likes of Hasebe-san and Sudou-kun.

I was envious of them, to some degree.

After thinking about it, Ayanokouji-kun was right. A lot of the guys probably dislike my arrogant attitude, but some girls look up to me. I was naturally fashionable and I was an expert in socializing. Even if I was Hirata-kun's girlfriend, I wouldn't garner any respect without putting in some effort. I became the girls' leader because of all that.

I didn't have to be such a bitch just to take control of the situation. There are amazing people like Ichinose-san who are respected by everyone while still being nice. I may not be as smart or athletic, but I can certainly become someone that my classmates can rely on.

At that moment, I decided to try and make that idea into reality.

I will start by following Ayanokouji-kun's plan. I will apologize to Morofuji Rika while not making myself seem weak. I will admit my fault and move on from this.

Ayanokouji-kun showed me his real self, much like how I revealed the truth of my past to him. It was something that only a few people were aware of, according to him. I didn't know if that's a blessing or a curse, but things will definitely change between the



both of us.



## SS.20 - Relationships

Technically, today should've been the third and final day of the Zodiac Test, but according to the rules, it would be tomorrow. Today was a rest day and we were free to roam around the ship as if nothing was happening. Of course, the rules and restrictions would still apply.

After breakfast, I decided to hang out with Makida, Kikuchi, Onizuka, and Minami (Hakuo) by the bow of the main deck.

The warm breeze blew against our skin as the rising sun created a glistening view of the ocean.

"Ahh... I want a girlfriend. This is the first summer of my high school life. I can't just mope around like an idiot," said Onizuka.

"Well, that's not for you to decide, Kiyoshi. You won't get a girlfriend unless the girl wants you, you know?" replied Kikuchi.

"Ugh-!" Onizuka grabbed his chest as if he was shot by a gun. "You're right, Eita... I gotta look manlier, or else..."

"Now, now, it's not like we can do anything about the girls in our class, though," shrugged Minami.

"Yeah. Hirata is already taken by Karuizawa... But this guy?" Makida turns to me with a smirk. "If you stay single, the girls will only ever look at you, you know?"

"Ahh... Well, I guess..."

I didn't really know what else to say. It's not like I don't know about the situation. My female friends have been hammering that fact onto me for a while now.

"Ahaha, at least you're aware of it, Ayanokouji," said Kikuchi.

"Yeah, I expected you to act like one of those dense harem protagonists in romcom manga. They tick me off the most." Onizuka put on a disgusted expression.

As someone who'd been using manga as an additional medium to learn social interaction, I can relate to Onizuka's statement. I was never a fan of the ones where the protagonist is unrealistically oblivious of the heroines' feelings. I find those stories less compelling than straightforward romances. But of course, some of them are written well enough to be entertaining until the very end.

"And you don't really need to apologize. It's not your fault that you're more popular than every other guy in our class," sighed Makida.



"I thought the attention was just brought on by my position in Class B. It seems like there are other factors at play," I replied. "I'm just happy that I'm not getting shunned."

"Hahaha! Why would you get shunned? What are we, middle schoolers?" Onizuka laughed while slapping my back.

"*What are we, middle schoolers?*" That question actually answered some of the questions I had.

"But really, Ayanokouji, I think you should consider getting a girlfriend. I'm sure you'll have fun." Kikuchi said as he put his hand on my shoulder.

Combined with his warm smile, he looked quite cool after saying that line. Kikuchi exuded a similar vibe to that of Hirata.

"Fuuu~! Eita has spoken!" Onizuka playfully struck his arm. "Your ex must've been regretting her decision to dump you now, huh? Look at how cool and manly you've become."

In terms of experience, Kikuchi would probably be our senpai. He had a lengthy relationship with a girl back in his middle school days, and it seemed like he was telling the truth given his calm and mature demeanor. There were no inconsistencies in his stories, too.

He was often compared to me or Akito since we act in a similar manner. If it weren't for his subpar academic and athletic performance, I'm sure he'd become popular.

"We were young back then. Breaking up was probably for the best. And besides, it was bound to happen given my enrollment in this school," he replied with a sigh. "If you're planning to get a girlfriend, you're better off going out with someone from the same school, especially in high school... And it's not like we have any other choice here, anyway."

"I did say that before, but..."

"What's there to worry about, Ayanokouji? You basically have the entire class to choose from-- Well, I guess besides Karuizawa. She's head over heels for Hirata, after all," said Makida.

"Really? I think Ayanokouji can do it if he tried," teased Onizuka.

"Are you dumb, Kiyoshi? And of all the girls that Ayanokouji would choose, why would he pick Karuizawa?" replied Makida.

"Ahaha, I guess you're right." Onizuka laughed bitterly as he scratched his head. "She might be too, uhh, *high-bar* for a first girlfriend...?"

Onizuka tried to sugarcoat his words, but all of us knew what he meant. Karuizawa's image in Class B was a girl who had a lot of experience with relationships and stuff. It was the reason why a lot of the guys said they wouldn't go for her even if she didn't have Hirata. They're either uncomfortable because of that assumption or intimidated by her so-called "*experience*".



They couldn't be more wrong, though.

"Well, you can never guess nowadays. We're all close friends with Hirata, so we know how solid of a guy he is. If he chose Karuizawa as his girlfriend, then there must've been something that he's seen from her-- something that mere classmates like us wouldn't know about," said Kikuchi.

To be honest, I really admire Kikuchi's open-minded way of thinking. Before she came to me for help, my impression of Karuizawa was exactly the same as most of the guys.

"But still, Ayanokouji won't go for someone who's already in a relationship. That much is obvious..." said Makida.

"Of course. Hey, Kouji. If you're looking to date someone, the obvious choice would be Kushida-chan." Onizuka pointed out something that I'm sure most of the boys can agree on. "I know I would!"

"Well, on paper, she's probably the top choice in our class," nodded Kikuchi.

"Much like how Ayanokouji is on the top of every girl's list, Kushida-chan is on top of every guy's list. She's kind, smart, and extremely cute. I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my high school life as her boyfriend," said Makida.

"Pfft, you? Not in a million years." Onizuka laughed heartily before looking extremely depressed. "I... I can say the same for myself, though... I-I can't even imagine a plausible timeline where Kushida-chan and I would become a couple... She's just... She's just too unreachable!"

Minami and I gently patted Onizuka's back. You just shot yourself in the heart, dude.

"In your case, probably. But we're talking about Ayanokouji here." Kikuchi turned to me. "I'm sure you've noticed it, too, right? I mean you're her best friend."

"That Kikyou likes me?" I asked.

"Woah... You're really becoming more and more direct as time passes, Ayanokouji..." Kikuchi commented while chuckling bitterly. "But yeah, that's what I'm talking about. Most of us have noticed how differently she's been acting around you recently."

"Yep. We're not even paying that much attention to her, unlike Yamauchi or Ike. And besides, I'm sure the girls have noticed it, too," added Makida.

I don't really mind if Kikyou sees me that way, and I'd probably agree to go out with her if asks me to. After all, it's not like I can just go out with anybody given my position in class competitions. I'd want to date someone who can handle being targeted by the enemies with me-- or at least, that's how it was back then.



If I retire from being the class leader, I wonder if I can have a normal relationship with someone.

"Ohh, not an instant denial? I guess Kushida-chan has a chance, then," said Minami.

It seems like I was lost in thought.

That said, since I didn't want to sound like a hypocrite, I guess I'll just tell them the same thing that I've told Inogashira and Ichihashi.

"Hmm... In contrary to my sentiment about wanting to have a girlfriend, I feel like I'm not ready to be in an actual relationship just yet," I shrugged.

"Ohh, as expected from an *"all-in"* type." Kikuchi gave an understanding nod.

"Then let's talk about hypotheticals! Who would you want as your first girlfriend, Kouji?" Onizuka lifted the atmosphere once again.

"Even with all that said and done, you'd probably want to date Kushida-chan, after all, right?" followed Kikuchi.

"Well, she is one of the obvious choices, so I can understand why you'd mention her first," I nodded.

"To be honest, I always thought you and Horikita-san would end up dating, but she's not that experienced with things like love. I doubt you'd want that kind of vibe. And besides, Horikita-san said that she's not interested in dating, anyway," said Makida.

"Ohh! I'm surprised you know that, Sumu-chan! Are you close with Horikita-san?" asked Onizuka.

"Oh... I'm curious, as well," I said.

Apart from me and Hirata, I didn't think Horikita would be friends with other guys.

"We were in the same scouting group during the island exam, you know? Given her personality, I doubt she considers me as a friend, but we had lots of time to socialize with each other. I got to talk to Horikita-san about some things," explained Makida.

Somehow, I feel happy for Horikita. She managed to open up to another classmate.

"Ah, man. I wanted to get close to Horikita-san, too. I don't really have a crush on her or anything, but I'd be really interested in becoming her friend," said Onizuka.

"Well, you might be really compatible, you know? If you manage to make Horikita-san laugh or smile, then you'd be doing everyone in Class B a huge service," replied Kikuchi.

"Ohh...! Horikita-san's smile! Yeah, that'd be extremely cute!" followed Minami.

"Kyouusuke and I have seen her smile, though," said Makida.

Oh, right. Okitani was also in the same group.

"R-Really-? How was it?" Onizuka asked with great anticipation.



"You're close with Horikita-san too, right Ayanokouji?" Makida asked with a smirk.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"Then you've obviously seen her smile at least once, right?" he continued.

"Mn," I nodded again.

"Why don't you tell them the answer then?" Makida gladly dumped his role on me.

I turned towards Onizuka, Kikuchi, and Minami, who were waiting for the answer. I gave them a thumbs-up before answering.

"Mn, very cute." I followed with a nod.

"Ohhh!"

"Man, I'm envious!"

"The smile of a beautiful tsundere..."

I wonder how Horikita would react if she heard about this...

"But going back to the question, I think Maya and Chiaki are good choices for you, too. From what I've seen in the last couple of months, it's safe to say that the two of them have a crush on you," said Kikuchi.

Kikuchi's friend group is very close to Satou's friend group, so I shouldn't be too surprised about hearing them refer to each other using first names.

"W-Wha-?! I have a crush on Chiaki, remember?! If Ayanokouji goes for her, I won't stand a chance!" protested Makida.

"Hehe, you're mentioning Maya and Chiaki but not Nene? Aren't you being unfair right now, Eita?" teased Onizuka.

Unfortunately for him, Kikuchi already expected those words.

"Well, I like Nene. Why would I endorse her to Ayanokouji?" he replied.

"Agh-" Once again, Onizuka grabbed his chest as if he was in pain. "As expected of you, Eita... What a manly answer."

"Now, now. If we're going to be real here, most of the girls in our class should be very interested in dating you. You have the luxury to choose the one that you want to get close to, Ayanokouji." Minami confidently stated before averting his eyes. "Well, maybe not Chiyo..."

"Hahaha! What the hell was that, Haku?" laughed Onizuka. "And besides, weren't you rejected by Chiyo already? Isn't that right, Haku~?"

"Shut up! That doesn't count since I didn't even confess!" objected Minami.

Ohh, so something like that happened, huh?

"If you guys are that worried about me taking away your crushes, then just ask them out." I lazily responded while leaning on the



railings.

"That's easier said than done, Kouji. We'd be going out with them by now if we were as sought after as you," replied Onizuka.

"Ah, I guess so..."

They could only smile wryly in response.

We continued talking about girls like normal high school boys. It was a fleeting moment, but I had a lot of fun. Of course, I've had similar talks with Akito and Ken, but I guess the more the merrier.

"Well, I have to be somewhere right about now. I'll see you guys later." I turned around and prepared to leave.

"Sure! Go get yourself a girlfriend soon, Kouji!" waved Onizuka.

"Hey, I was just kidding about earlier. If you're interested in Nene, then you can go for her. I'll gladly be your rival," said Kikuchi.

"To pick a losing fight... Y-You're too cool, Eita..."

He's right. Akito and Hirata were cool in their own way, but Kikuchi was a different kind of cool.

"Haha, I'm instantly deemed as the loser? Aren't you being too harsh, Kiyoshi? But then again, it's Ayanokouji that I'm going up against."

"I'll have to pass, Kikuchi. I'd rather have you as a supporter than a rival," I replied.

After bidding them a quiet and brief farewell, I walked towards the inside of the ship.

This may have been a rest day, but the battle hasn't stopped.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*Onizuka's (Temporary) First Name is "喜佳", read as "Kiyoshi".*

#### *Characters:*

- Onizuka Kiyoshi
- Kikuchi Eita
- Makida Susumu
- Minami Hakuo



## Vol. 4: Chapter 9.1 - Unfamiliar Group

"You're late," said the cute girl wearing casual clothes.

"My bad."

"Well, whatever."

Karuizawa Kei and I met up on the 7th deck, by the bookstore. She arranged a meeting with Morofuji on the 10th deck, and since her friends would be there, Karuizawa asked me to accompany her, as well. The conversation will be unpredictable, so taking me instead of Hirata was the best idea.

"Have you told them about this?"

"The other girls? Yeah, I have."

Karuizawa began to talk about how she explained the situation to her friends.

She skillfully painted herself in a mature light, telling everyone that Manabe and the other two had been verbally harassing her about being a bully and a hypocrite due to that incident with Morofuji. Of course, Karuizawa didn't deny her fault.

So to make them stop *"annoying"* her, she decided to apologize. After all, Karuizawa recognized that she was in the wrong for being harsh and mean to Morofuji.

The key thing about this was Karuizawa's attitude towards the act of apologizing. She had to make them believe that this wasn't a big deal to her.

"It's just an apology. 'Not like I'm being forced to apologize for something I didn't do,' she shrugged. 'That's what I told them.'"

As expected, she earned the praises of her friends for being mature. Karuizawa saw her own mistake and decided to apologize out of her own free will. That's how it was on paper.

"Nothing less from you, I guess."

"Duh, of course."

Quite a few students were spending their time on the Sun Deck because of the pool area. The two of us continued walking forward until we reached the meeting place. It was a pretty hidden area near the corner of the Sun Deck. Manabe's group was waiting with Morofuji Rika.

"So you came, after all." Manabe crossed her arms with a glare.

"Huh? I'm not a hypocrite like you guys. Of course, I'd come." Karuizawa bit back without batting an eye.



Morofuji shyly hid behind Manabe. She was quite terrified of Karuizawa, understandably so.

"You're Morofuji-san, right?" She shifted her attention towards the frightened girl. "Ah, I remember now. You really were the girl I pushed out of that line."

"Yeah, she's been a lot more reserved when dealing with other people because of you," said Yamashita.

"Excuse me? Sorry, but I wasn't talking to you." Karuizawa gave her a side glance before turning back to Morofuji. "Well, the point is; I was wrong. I got carried away because we were having fun. That's why I'm apologizing right now. I'm sorry."

Manabe, Yamashita, and Yabu narrowed their eyes as she stared at her. Maybe they weren't fully convinced that Karuizawa's apology was sincere.

"I totally forgot about this incident so I guess you could also thank your friends for reminding me. So, do you accept my apology?" Karuizawa's expression was gentle. Even if Morofuji rejected her apology, she was willing to accept it. As long as she managed to apologize, her end of the bargain had been completed.

"U-Uhm... I'm sorry if this became a bigger deal than it should've been... I'm okay now." Morofuji meekly replied.

"I see... Thanks for being understanding." Karuizawa sighed with a shrugged.

To me, it looked like Karuizawa was happy for Morofuji. She had friends who could lean against when things like these happen. Of course, I can't really know for sure just how genuine their friendship is. After all, it reached a point where Manabe and the other two just used the incident as an excuse to air out their envy.

"So, is our business here done?" I asked.

"Well, almost." Karuizawa slowly approached the three girls and--  
\*Slap\*

Karuizawa's dainty hands struck Yabu's cheeks with force.

"That's payback for last night," she said.

Yabu held her face in surprise.

"Nanami-chan!"

"Nanami!"

"Karuizawa, you-!"

The situation instantly turned grim. Manabe and Yamashita were immediately enraged, and Morofuji flinched in shock. Meanwhile, Karuizawa didn't seem bothered at all.

"Well? Would you say that I'm in the wrong this time, too?" she asked.

Manabe and Yamashita couldn't respond. After all, it was Yabu's fault for slapping Karuizawa first.



"I-It's fine, Shiho-chan, Saki-chan..." Yabu eyed Karuizawa with a sharp look. "I got carried away last night, so I guess this is fair. Sorry, Karuizawa..."

"Hmph, apology accepted." Karuizawa snorted lightly in response.

That slap cemented her status onto them. She reinforced the fact that her weak attitude last night was nothing but an act.

"Let's stop this, Shiho-chan. She already told us that it's the best course of action. We can't afford to trouble the class any longer."

"*She*"? Is Yabu talking about Ibuki?

"You're... You're right," replied Manabe. "C'mon, let's go."

The four of them left without any trouble. As soon as we got left alone, Karuizawa grabbed the sleeve of my shirt. When I turned my head around, she was panting slightly with beads of sweat on her forehead.

"You alright?"

"Yeah... My bad. It's just that, I still can't forget how they bullied me last night, and that was the first time I've ever slapped someone..." Karuizawa's voice was mixed with a faint quiver.

She took a deep breath and calmed herself.

"You've done well-"

I reflexively raised my hand to pat her head. Good thing I stopped myself before doing so. I've been too accustomed to doing it for Kikyuu.

"Hm?" Karuizawa cocked her head curiously, wondering as to why I was staring at my hand.

"Well, it's almost time for lunch. I'm assuming you have plans?" I asked, shifting the topic.

"Yep, with Hirata-kun."

"Alright, I guess I'll see you later then."

"H-Hey, wait! Don't just walk out on me." Karuizawa grabbed the hem of my shirt in a panic.

"What?"

"Geez, we can at least head down to the 9th deck together," she pouted.

"Oh, okay."

The two of us got off the elevator and finally decided to separate around the food court.

"I'll be going on ahead."

"Thanks for today, Ayanokouji-kun..." Karuizawa expressed her gratitude with a demure appearance.

"Sure. Call me if you need any help," I replied, before turning around.

I thought to myself as I left. I didn't have any plans for lunch. And



since I already declined my friends' invitations beforehand, I guess I'll have no choice but to eat alone. I wonder if there are any good places around here...

Oh...

"I guess nothing hurts with trying," I muttered.

As a sheltered boy, I never had the chance to eat in any fast-food chains.

There were a couple of fast-food chains back at the campus, but I haven't been to this particular one.

"Oh? If it isn't Ayanokouji."

There were some students inside and one student from a particular group noticed my unassuming entrance. It was Class A's Hashimoto Masayoshi.

He was currently eating with three other Class A students: Satonaka Satoru, Motodoi Chikako, and Rokkaku Momoe.

"Did you just come in first? Or are you really not with anyone?" he asked.

"I'm alone. Is that weird?"

"Ahaha, no, no. Well, I guess it's pretty rare for you to be alone, but it's not weird," replied Hashimoto.

Rare, huh? I guess that's a fair description.

"So you're Ayanokouji-kun? It's nice to finally meet you." Satonaka smoothly joined the conversation.

Man-- from his looks to his demeanor... It's easy to tell that he's a social elite. Now I understand why Satonaka ranks higher than Hirata in the *"hot guy"* rankings.

"Ah, why don't you sit with us, Ayanokouji? There's a free seat over here," offered Hashimoto.

"Oh, no. I wouldn't want to disturb your group." I shook my head in response.

I thought I managed to escape safely, but reality wasn't so simple.

"Well, I'm quite alright with you joining us." Satonaka turned towards Rokkaku and Motodoi. "Is it okay with the two of you?"

"Sure~!"

"Yep, I'm totally fine with it."

While they didn't look uncomfortable with the idea, I sure was.

"You're welcome here, Ayanokouji. Come eat with us," urged Hashimoto. "Ah, but feel free to decline. You might not feel too pleasant about eating with an unfamiliar group."

I can easily decline him, but it's not like I'm taking my order out of the restaurant. And since there were no single seats, eating alone would be much weirder after saying no to their offer. Coming up with another excuse would just make me sound awkward.

What a dilemma...



I didn't really have a problem with sudden events like this, but that's because I was already comfortable with my classmates, same with Ichinose's class. So if a friend group from Class A or D invites me, I'd obviously feel out of my comfort zone.

Alas, because of my position as Class B's leader, I must embrace the fact I've become an elite when it comes to social status... However, my social skills could hardly keep up.

"I see. If it's not a problem, then I'll take you up on that offer," I replied.

After bringing my food to the table, I sat beside Hashimoto, who still had most of his meal left untouched. I briefly observed the other three's meals and saw that they had about the same amount. It seems like the gap between the times of our arrival wasn't much.

"Thanks for the food." I quietly muttered before digging in.

With their accommodating personalities, Satonaka and Hashimoto instantly barraged me with questions.

"I'm kinda curious. I can imagine some of your friends inviting you out for lunch, so I wanted to ask why you've decided to eat here alone," mused Hashimoto.

I guess declining all of the invitations turned out to be a mistake.

"Is this one of your favorite places, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Motodoi.

"Not really. It's actually my first time eating here," I replied.

"Ehh, that's kinda surprising," commented Rokkaku. "But... it's not like I eat here that often, so I guess I can understand."

"Well, I wanted to try out some new places by myself. And to be honest, it feels refreshing to explore the ship alone." I don't know if Hashimoto would be satisfied by that answer, but it's quite the common excuse.

"Whoops, I'm sorry if I interrupted your alone time." Hashimoto apologized in a slightly comical manner.

"Not really. Being with a new group feels refreshing, too."

"Hm? Are you saying that you're tired of your old group of friends?" joked Satonaka.

"Of course not..." Playing the tsukkomi, I replied with a lazy sigh.

The girls laughed at our exchange. So far, so good. Nothing socially disastrous has happened yet.

"By the way, Ayanokouji-kun..." Rokkaku addressed me with a curious smile. "Is it true that you're dating Kikyuu-chan?"

"Ohh... Momoe-chan, you just went at it, didn't you?" said Motodoi.

Why am I not surprised by this question?

"Ohh. Way to go, Ayanokouji," Hashimoto nudged me with his elbow.



"I'm actually curious, as well. Some girls in the class have been talking about it," followed Motodoi.

"Quite a number of Class A guys have a crush on Kushida-san, so the topic interests me, too," added Satonaka.

Well, I guess this wasn't something that I should be shocked about given Kikyou's immense popularity and massive social clout. That said, I need to tell them the truth.

"We're not dating," I replied with a simple sentence.

My answer bewildered them, which was perfectly understandable. The closeness that I have with Kikyou wasn't something that any other male student could hope to have. So from an outsider's perspective, it certainly feels like our relationship is beyond that of a platonic one.

"Ehh... Color me surprised..." said Rokkaku.

"Oi, oi, are you serious, Ayanokouji? Kushida Kikyou's a fine woman, you know? If you don't act fast, I might just steal her from you," teased Hashimoto.

Even if he was obviously joking, Motodoi couldn't help but react. I noticed the faint look of shock in her eyes.

"Eh? I thought you were going for Ichinose-san," commented Satonaka.

"Nah, I changed my mind. She's pretty, but I don't think our personalities would mesh well. And as much I hate to admit it, I don't think my charms would work on her." Hashimoto shook his head with a shrug.

It takes a certain amount of self-confidence to down yourself like that without sounding forced or unnatural.

"Hahaha, I see, I see. But Kushida-san also seems like the type of girl that you won't be too compatible with."

"Hey, you're hurting my feelings here, Satoru."

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding."

While the two guys were bantering, Rokkaku asked me another question.

"If you're not dating Kikyou-chan, is there anyone else that you're interested in?"

"Not really. I'm not as amazing as someone like Ichinose, so leading the class is enough of a stress-inducer for me. I don't have time to think about anything else."

"Oh, is that the case? Hmm, I guess class leaders have it hard..." Motodoi followed up with another question. "But... your leadership aside, aren't your grades among the best in our year?"

According to Chabashira-sensei, I was the actual best earlier this semester. But I'm pretty sure Sakayanagi had overtaken me after the final exam. Subtly worsening my grades to the lower 90's would



further support my "stress" excuse.

"I hope so. I'm studying hard, after all. How about you two?"

I finally managed to bounce the question back.

"Well... I'm studying normally, I guess. This school is harsh on failures, after all." Rokkaku sheepishly poked her cheek with a finger.

"I'm in the tennis club, so my attention is also divided, but I think I'm doing alright," answered Motodoi.

"I see. I guess that's to be expected from Class A students."

Rokkaku Momoe and Motodoi Chikako-- I got to know them a bit more before the two guys finally continued interrogating me. I'd be lying if I say that I didn't feel like an outsider. However, they didn't make that feeling obvious to me. Both Hashimoto and Satonaka kept the atmosphere lively while Motodoi and Rokkaku showed genuine interest in what I had to say. Of course, I tried my best to reciprocate their efforts to keep the conversations going.

Around half an hour passed before the five of us finally finished up.

"We're heading down to the 6th deck. How about you, Masayoshi?"

"Well, I'm thinking about that right now." Hashimoto turned to me with a smirk. "If you don't have any plans, wanna hang out with me, Ayanokouji?"

I immediately got what he was trying to imply. Of course, I wouldn't want this chance to get wasted.

"Sure."

"And that's that. I guess I'll see you later, Satoru. It was fun hanging out with you too, Motodoi-san, Rokkaku-chan."

I also exchanged farewells with the three of them. It seems like the number of my acquaintances from Class A has increased.

Now then, I'll make good use of the chance that this rest day has presented me.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*The reason why Kiyotaka declined all invitations from his friends was that he initially bet that Kei also didn't have any plans for lunch and that they would eat together after their business with the Class D girls. He was wrong, though.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 9.2 - Not Even You

Even if today was a rest day, rules were still rules. Since this was entirely different from just having lunch together, we couldn't hang around for too long.

I checked the clock on my phone and saw that it was already 12:49 PM. Hashimoto immediately opened the discussion as soon as we reached the main deck's stern.

"How's the exam going for you?"

"I'm not enjoying it more than you. That's for sure."

After all, Hashimoto was also a member of the Monkey Group. Because of Kouenji's actions, their group basically got exempted after the first day.

"Ahaha! I gotta thank the traitor for that. I can't believe someone was ballsy enough to submit a name after two group discussions."

"Was the traitor not from your class?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"Well, the name of the traitor isn't that relevant, to begin with, so I guess it doesn't really matter." I shrugged with a sigh.

For a brief moment, the two of us just silently watched the bright blue ocean surrounding the ship.

"Since this was your idea, I'm assuming you want to exchange some information," I said.

"Yeah. Contacting Sakayanagi is forbidden, so the school temporarily blocked her number. Of course, Mashima-sensei already explained the situation to her. Meanwhile, I can't really think of any winning strategy for this exam. Things are getting pretty tight for Class A."

Hashimoto and I talked with our gazes fixated forward. I could catch a glimpse of his small grin in my peripheral vision.

"Sakayanagi can't help you, huh? Does that mean you're working with Katsuragi for now?"

"Haha, not necessarily. His defensive strategy is good, but if the enemy gets a hold of the pieces, everything will break apart for us. The Sakayanagi Faction is letting him do what he wants, but we're also trying to find ways to win this thing," he replied.

"I heard he's working with Ryuuen. Or is that you and your faction?"

"Nah. Katsuragi has his hawk eyes on us. Because of the nature of



this exam, we can't really make contact with Ryuuen or his associates."

"It's about the island exam, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Katsuragi is an extremely smart guy, so I already expected him to figure out my betrayal. But since I was working on my own, the Sakayanagi Faction didn't know what was going on. Katsuragi managed to make most of our classmates suspect me, even my allies," he sighed. "I don't know if you've figured it out already, but Katsuragi and Ryuuen are working together again. If I try to make contact with Ryuuen, Katsuragi will know, and that would strengthen his claims of my betrayal."

"I'm surprised he managed to convince the class."

*"Class D will give us VIP names in exchange for private points. I'll use my own and my willing allies' private points to make the deal. That should be enough to secure our lead."* Hashimoto tried to impersonate Katsuragi's voice and tone. "That's what he told everyone. Of course, all of us agreed. They're the ones spending their own money, not us."

Hashimoto's tone exuded style and confidence. A normal person wouldn't be able to know if he's lying or not in a casual situation like this.

"So you really can't scheme with Ryuuen this time, huh?"

"Unfortunately." Hashimoto's smile didn't match up with his reply.

I wonder if he's still planning to make contact with him regardless.

"If you get caught, Sakayanagi could just pin everything on you."

If Hashimoto associates himself with Ryuuen again and succeeds, the Sakayanagi Faction, and Class A by extension, wins. However, if Hashimoto gets caught and his betrayal gets proven to the class, only *he* would lose. After all, if Sakayanagi uses him as a scapegoat, it would be a low-risk-high-return deal for the Sakayanagi Faction as a whole. The plan was risky for him alone.

"She wouldn't do that, even with her nature. Objectively, leaving me to die also means making an enemy out of me. If I was a simple grunt, then I guess it's the best course of action, but I'm quite high up the ladder, you know? If I manage to convince Katsuragi about taking me in, he'd have an enormous advantage. I'm an extremely loyal subject, too." Hashimoto openly bragged about his position. He casually mentions his loyalty as he talks about changing sides.

Sigh, he's just messing with me at this point.

"However," he continued. "I'm really not planning on doing anything with Ryuuen this time. I can't afford to act on my own in such a dire situation."



Judging by his serious expression, it didn't look like Hashimoto was lying.

So he's not working with Ryuuen, after all? Well, it's not like he needed to convince me. I already knew that.

"I see. So now, your plan is to work with me instead."

"That's right! It's great that you're quick on the uptake."

"Are you planning to tell me about the VIPs from your class then?"

"Hahaha, that's a funny joke." Hashimoto chuckled blithely, but the look in his eyes changed. "Negotiation in this exam is pointless, Ayanokouji. You know that."

"Of course. Even the alliance between Class B and C is half-baked at best. The risk of revealing anything is too high."

"But Katsuragi said something interesting. I'm sure you've heard about it already."

"Hmm... I don't think so."

"Ryuuen-- He figured out the VIPs' identities."

"Oh, that."

"So you've heard about it, after all! Man, give me back my excitement. I thought I was revealing something shocking..." Hashimoto sighed with a vexed expression.

"That's just how it is. Horikita and the rest of the Dragon Group dismissed it as a bluff. What he said never really stuck in our minds since none of us took him seriously."

"Hmm... Well, I guess that's fair."

"I'm sure Katsuragi wouldn't just take Ryuuen's deal without having something significant in return, right?"

"Of course. He's banking on the fact that only Ryuuen could figure out the identity of the VIPs. So in exchange for an inflated amount of private points, Ryuuen will refrain from targeting Class A's VIPs."

According to the details that Hashimoto gave me, Ryuuen would be taking 200,000 private points on top of the half-million reward.

"So far, Ryuuen had only given us one VIP name, which Katsuragi plans to submit tomorrow. I'd love to share who it is, but Katsuragi doesn't trust me."

So Katsuragi kept the name for himself, huh?

"Don't worry, I wasn't that hopeful, to begin with. Regardless, if Ryuuen decides to stop there, he'd be taking 200,000 private points in exchange for not targeting three Class A VIPs. Isn't that too one-sided?"

If Ryuuen betrays Katsuragi and targets them anyway, he'd earn 1.5 million private points and 150 class points. The rewards are too big to be wasted.



"Exactly... I've thought of some possibilities for this." Hashimoto raised his hand showing four fingers. "One; Katsuragi put something else on the table that he didn't mention to us-- something that made Ryuen agree to this absurd deal. Two; Ryuen doesn't know all of the VIPs, and he was just lucky to find the one that he gave us. Katsuragi knew this and took the money deal. Three; Ryuen will keep his word because he just feels like it, which is very unlikely from a logical standpoint but isn't an impossibility given his personality. Or four; Katsuragi might just be dumb and Ryuen never planned on sparing Class A, in the first place."

"Wouldn't the fourth possibility be bad for you guys?"

"It's disappointing more than anything else, to be honest. If that really was the case, then I guess we overestimated Katsuragi." Hashimoto shook his head dismissively. "That said, I feel like there's a fifth possibility that no one is seeing."

"And that is?"

"Well, I hope I knew. If I could contact Sakayanagi, I'm sure she'd know the answer."

"You have a lot of confidence in her."

"Haha... It's Sakayanagi, after all..." Hashimoto's eyes narrowed inscrutably. "To be honest, I can't really find the right words to describe her. That brain of hers... I don't think anyone in this school could even compare... Not even the likes of Katsuragi, Ichinose, or Ryuen..."

Hashimoto turned to me with an enigmatic smile.

"Not even you."

He stared at me for a little bit before letting out a chuckle.

"Ahaha, I'm just kidding. There's no way I can compare her with anyone just yet. After all, I don't really know what you guys are truly capable of."

"It seems like your evaluation of Sakayanagi is very high," I replied with a piqued tone.

"Hey, hey, don't hold it against me now, Ayanokouji. I'm not just talking about placing high on the written exam, you know?" Hashimoto smirked, amused by my reply. "That said, of course, I'd put our princess on a pedestal. Abilities aside, she's a lot more fun to work with than boring guys like Katsuragi."

Sakayanagi Arisu. She's a mysterious student who knows about my past. Hashimoto's opinion aside, even the chairman, who knew about the White Room, seemed to feel like she can fare against someone like me. If that's true, then she might just be able to--

"Alright! It seems like I've blabbered for too long." Hashimoto



stretched his arms with a simper. "Now then, why don't I ask you some questions?"

On the surface, I've certainly gained some useful information. He gave me a bunch of details regarding Class A's course of action, and he also talked about Sakayanagi, whom I'm fairly interested in. Benefits aside, it's only natural for me to fulfill my end of the bargain.

"Sure."

"Firstly, I've already accepted that none of us will be able to find the other VIPs-- not with limited clues and limited access to the other groups' discussions. That's why I went so far as to reveal Class A's plan. It wouldn't be too hard for you to give me something of equal value, right?"

In other words, our plan.

"Class B's plan isn't much of a secret, though. I don't mind telling you what it is, but only Horikita knows about the details."

"Don't worry about it. Katsuragi had already told us. Horikita plans to find the VIPs no matter what, right?"

"Yeah. She hasn't updated me on her progress yet, and the same goes with Kikyuu and Hirata. Meanwhile, I stopped trying to find the VIPs after the first day. I've left everything to Horikita and the others."

"Horikita and the others, huh? Is that so...?" Hashimoto squinted his eyes with a grin. "Alright, I believe you."

Hashimoto didn't have to worry. *Explicitly speaking*, I haven't told him a single lie.

"That said, she was fixated on the fact that a pattern exists," I continued.

"Yes, all of us believe that as well. The instructions tell us that the VIPs' assignment wasn't done randomly. Of course, the teachers have told us the same thing. From what it looks like, the VIP should be qualified in something so that the role is given to him or her."

"You're talking about the school's message, right?"

"Yep. That was an obvious clue, alongside the fact that we were briefed in order. All of that must lead to something."

"That's pretty impressive, Hashimoto. You've basically laid out what Horikita has been thinking about in the past two days. Since you're on the same track, you might've been able to figure out the VIPs should the test last a little longer."

"I appreciate the compliment, but I'm nothing compared to some people." Hashimoto chuckled before eyeing me down with a sharp look. "I hate to say it, but we've reached a dead end. Using those vital clues is actually doing the opposite. The more we look into it, the muddier everything gets. Nothing adds up."



"I see... Then it's safe to assume that Horikita would be in the same state..." I stared at Hashimoto before telling him the advantage that Horikita has. "Well, not really... Horikita might just break out of that rut."

Hashimoto's donned an expression of amusement and interest.

"Do tell me more," he said.

"Unlike Class A, Horikita knows the name of a fourth VIP," I replied.

As of last night, Ichinose and Class C would be in the same playing field given that we've surrendered Karuizawa's identity, but Hashimoto didn't need to know that.

He received my answer without much of a reaction.

"Sigh... I guess that makes sense. Ahh, that's quite unfortunate for us, then," he shrugged. "But you know, as much as I don't doubt Horikita's abilities, do you think she can figure everything out before the end of the exam? If Ryuen told him the truth, then Katsuragi would also be holding the same card. If he wants to win everything, he'll have to race with Horikita."

"Frankly, I have no idea. As a classmate, all I can do is believe in her."

"So you, the mastermind behind Katsuragi and Ryuen's defeats, wouldn't give her a helping hand?" Hashimoto raised an eyebrow, observing my response.

"I'm just a bit cunning. These types of exams are Horikita's specialty."

"Really now? Well, it's not like I don't get where you're coming from. This school has a way to make the students dance around in the dark. If we had Sakayanagi's help, this exam would've been over ages ago."

"It seems like we've gotten lucky then-- for someone like Sakayanagi to be absent during the first two special exams."

"Haha, who knows?" Hashimoto shook his head in response.

*\*Honk\**

The two of us stopped leaning our bodies against the railings. As the cruise's loud horn reverberated throughout the entire ship, Hashimoto and I finally decided to call it quits.

"Should we wrap it right here? Or do you want to share more?"

"I'm good. I wanted to lie down for a bit, anyway."

"Alright. It's been a nice talk, Ayanokouji."

Hashimoto happily gave his farewell.

I got back to my room without much incident. Utilizing my knowledge of the ship's interior, I managed to avoid contact with anyone I know.

At the end of the day, my conversation with Hashimoto didn't



amount to much. Even if he knew about the VIPs from Class A, sharing their names is impossible, especially since we're almost equal in class points. After the island exam, it's obvious that Hashimoto and the rest of the Sakayanagi Faction weren't willing to sacrifice Class their position and status as Class A just for a chance to topple Katsuragi's leadership.

On the surface, Hashimoto might've gained something from the information I gave him, but other than alerting Katsuragi, it's not like there's anything they can do. Similarly, the information that he gave me wasn't all that helpful. Well, I'm sure Horikita could do something with it, but that would only give her more things to think about.

And for me, apart from the information about Sakayanagi, everything was fundamentally... useless.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 9.2.2 - Quick Visit

Rest Day, 1:30 PM

"That was a refreshing shower," I muttered.

I checked my messages after putting on some clothes.

*(13:28) [Are you in your room right now?]*

*(13:30) [Yeah, why?]*

*(13:30) [I was wondering if I could visit you.]*

*(13:30) [Sure.]*

It was around this time that I heard a knock from outside. My roommates wouldn't do such a thing so whoever's behind that door isn't one of them.

"Kikyou-?"

The girl who awaited the reception instantly ran to my embrace the moment I opened the door.

Did she teleport? Wait, that's not right... She must've been already outside when she sent that text.

"Let me... recharge for a bit..."

"..."

The two of us sat on my bed. I assumed it was time for *that* again, but...

"Sigh..."

"Is there a problem?"

"Hm? Ahh, not really. You're probably expecting me to vent, right? I don't really need to do that right now. I'm just... tired, I guess."

This wasn't a rare occurrence or anything. Kikyou often looked for me whenever she gets mentally drained.

"I'm just a bit worn out. I've been accommodating my friends nonstop since morning. I want some time for myself."

Kikyou's room is probably crowded, so coming here might've been a good idea.

The atmosphere turned warm as she leaned her head on my shoulders.

"I'm sorry, was I disturbing you?" she asked.

"Not really."

"I thought you were resting, so I hesitated at first."

"I was just biding time for later."

"Hm? Is something happening?" Kikyou tilted her head curiously.



"Ryuuen called for us-- me, Horikita, Ichinose, and Kanzaki. It seems like he's got something to say."

"Is this about him knowing all of the VIPs?" Kikyou's tone finally dropped.

"Most likely. I don't think I'm needed there since I'm not even helping, but I guess I can listen to how Ryuuen plans to propel the exam forward."

"Do you think he knows?" asked Kikyou, looking at me with upturned eyes.

Kikyou's slight anxiety was evident. After all, she was our group's VIP.

"No, I don't think he does," I replied.

Kikyou sighed in relief.

"Well, I might be wrong, you know?"

She then wraps her arms around my waist. I felt her softness engulf the left side of my body.

"Even so. Your word was the best reassurance that I could possibly get."

I moved my hand to pat Kikyou's defenseless head.

"This kind of interaction-- I thought you wanted us to stop."

Submitting herself to my warmth, Kikyou leaned all of her weight against me.

"Don't think about it too deeply, Kiyotaka-kun. This is just skinship between best friends," she replied, obviously playing dumb.

"We're teenagers... and you're a girl and I'm a guy." I continued with my futile verbal resistance.

"As I said, don't think about it too deeply." Kikyou tightened her embrace. "I don't like you that way."

We're together in this facade. As long as she doesn't admit anything, she can get away with doing this. Kikyou knows that I don't have any plans of forcefully calling her out or taking the initiative. Because of that, she can try to accomplish two specific things at the same time; to push me over the edge and to satisfy her own desires.

"Sigh, fine... Let's talk about the group, then. Is that alright with you?"

"Mn, mn." Kikyou nodded while her head was buried on my chest. It tickled.

"How are you finding the members right now? Do you think anyone's caught on about your identity as the VIP?"

"Hmm, Matoba-kun doesn't seem to pay that much attention to anyone else so I guess he's in the green. I'm friends with Nishikawa-san and Yano-san so I managed to get their insights on the current situation. Fortunately for me, it seems like they plan to follow



Katsuragi-kun's lead, so they're not particularly on the hunt for the VIP," she explained. "And apart from Ryuuen-kun, whom I can't get a good read on, Class D doesn't seem to be that much of a threat."

"How about Class C then?"

"Let's see... Like Ryuuen-kun, I can't really pinpoint how Ichinose-san's mind really operates. I'm sure you're aware of it by now, but she's just as sly as someone like me. That said, she shouldn't be suspicious of any particular person right now. Kanzaki-kun and Hitomi-chan are the same."

Kanzaki and Tsube are both gifted in academics and sports. Having them in the Dragon Group alongside Ichinose wasn't a coincidence. Even if they're our "*allies*", it's still good to stay vigilant against them.

Kikyou and I continued talking about some other stuff-- mostly about the class and our friends. After some time has passed, she finally decided to leave. We had our final exchange by the open door.

"Good luck with your meeting later, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Yeah, you don't have to worry too much about your current position. The exam is almost over, anyway. I just hope everything turns out alright in the end."

Kikyou received my answer with a smile. We stared at each other for a second before she opened her mouth.

"Kiyotaka-kun, lend me your ears for a bit," she said.

Is she going to whisper something? I asked myself while complying with her request.

Kikyou has done this many times before-- sometimes to tell a secret, most of the time to tease me by whispering some embarrassing things. I thought it would go one way or the other, but she had something different in mind this time.

Even I was caught off-guard.

*\*Chu\**

Her soft lips touched my unassuming left cheek.

"Huh?"

I wasn't even sure about what happened for a split second. After Kikyou pulled away with her alluringly cute smile, she meekly waved her hand goodbye.

"See you later, Kiyotaka-kun~."

Her eyes wandered to the side for a moment before she finally went on her way. I couldn't really do anything but wave back.

Before her figure could disappear from the hallway, I looked to my left and saw a half-naked Kouenji. His lower half was covered



by a towel and his hair and torso were still dripping with water. The floor underneath and behind him had trails of wetness.

"My, my. It seems like I've witnessed something interesting," he said, smiling audaciously.

"Kouenji... Did the bellhop finally give up on you?" I replied, trying to change the topic.

If being seen by a third party was inevitable, Kouenji was probably the best possible option. But somehow, I still felt exhausted by the thought.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 9.3 - The Devil's Warning

It was the perfect weather for any student to relax by the Sun Deck's pool. The refreshing feel of the water in contrast to the searing rays of the sun-- such combination will make anyone embody the season that is summer.

While most of the first-year students of the Tokyo Metropolitan Advanced Nurturing High School immersed themselves in fun and relaxation, a group of exemplary students had other plans.

"Oh, it looks like my invitation didn't fall on deaf ears. Come, have a seat."

The one who spoke those words was none other than Class D's tyrannical leader, Ryuen Kakeru. He smiled after seeing the arrival of four key students from his zodiac group: Kanzaki Ryuuji, Ichinose Honami, Horikita Suzune, and of course, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

"Why did you call us here, Ryuen?" asked Kanzaki.

"You don't have to sound so stiff, Kanzaki. I just wanted to have a little chat," he replied with a smirk.

"Do you seriously think we'll believe your bluff, Ryuen-kun?" followed Horikita.

Her eyebrows twitched as she said those words. After all, she felt like Ryuen's confidence didn't stem from a stupid bluff. However, Horikita's internal uncertainty didn't show outside.

"Sure. If you want to have a chat, then I'm down. It seems like the group discussions aren't enough for you, huh?" said Ichinose.

"Heh. It seems like everyone's doubting me in terms of how much I currently control the situation, but that's okay. I haven't really started the show yet. That said, how about you, Ichinose? Does Class C even have a plan?"

"Who knows? Even if we do have a plan, you can't possibly expect me to say anything, right?"

"Sure, sure."

"Can you get on with it, Ryuen? I don't really get why I'm even here, but I think you should get straight to the point." Ayanokouji Kiyotaka finally joined the conversation. It would make sense that Horikita was called, but he wasn't participating as much in this exam, so choosing to call him over Hirata or Kushida was indeed strange.

He eyed the corners of the pathway, sensing that other people



were hiding their presence.

"Oh? Are you uncomfortable, Ayanokouji? Don't worry about those guys. Those are just Ibuki, Ishizaki, and my other classmates. Cameras are scattered around the ship, so we'd be in trouble if I let them in on the discussion, right?"

Since talking with students who aren't part of your class and your assigned group for an extended period of time is forbidden, Ryuen stationed his classmates away from their meeting place. It was also the reason why Ayanokouji and Hashimoto talked in a very inconspicuous place with no cameras.

"What's with those looks? I'd rather have us meet up in a place filled with cameras but with seats than somewhere unmonitored but we have to stand like idiots. Can't you see how considerate I'm being?" Ryuen spread his arms as he leaned back in his chair.

"Fine. Let's get this over with, shall we?" said Horikita. "What do you want to tell us, Ryuen-kun?"

"Ohh! Finally feel like listening, Suzune?"

"We wouldn't have come here if that wasn't our intention."

"Alright then. To be honest, this is just me doing some charity work." Ryuen relaxed as he narrowed his eyes. "I'd rather see your shocked reactions when everything gets in place tomorrow, but I guess there's no way around it."

"What are you getting at, Ryuen?" asked Kanzaki.

Horikita and Ichinose's expressions turned serious. They felt like something catastrophic dwelled behind Ryuen's words.

"The Monkey Group and the Rabbit Group-- I'm sure you're familiar with those two, right?"

"They're the first two groups to finish the exam," answered Horikita.

"But what about the Cow Group?" Ryuen turned towards Ichinose.

"What about the Cow Group, Ryuen-kun?" she returned his question with a perfectly straight face.

"Oh...? Then what about the Horse Group?" he continued, locking eyes with the seemingly unperturbed Ichinose.

"Like I asked you before; what about them?" she replied.

"Kukuku, oh man... This is so amusing! Ahahaha!" Ryuen's small chuckle evolved into a laugh. "Now now. There's no need to panic. I know your minds are in turmoil at the moment, but you guys will have to wait for tomorrow. I know I kinda spoiled it a bit, I'm sure you'll still love my surprise."

Ryuen seemed to be done with his piece. It was so short that from an outsider's perspective, the meeting was nothing but a waste of time. Of course, the leaders of Class B and C didn't think that at



all. What he said gave them nothing but ominous feelings.

It should've been time for the others to talk, but they were interrupted by a sudden commotion.

"W-Wait, Ibuki-san..."

"You can't be here..."

A familiar voice could be heard by the corner of the walkway. Ibuki restrained a lone female student who seemed to have stumbled upon the place. Some of the Class D guys who were on standby surrounded them as well.

"Kushida-san...?"

"Kikyou-chan?"

Horikita, Ichinose, and Kanzaki were confused. The five of them stood up from their seats, including Ryuuen himself.

"Oh? What do we have here?"

Horikita cast a glare towards Ayanokouji, who stood beside her.

"What? I just happened to tell her about this meeting when we were hanging out earlier," he pre-emptively spoke out.

"Why did you tell her the time and location?"

"Well, she was curious enough to ask."

*"Telling her that much shouldn't be such a big deal, you know?"* he thought with a sigh.

Ibuki restrained her movements with a conflicted expression. Kushida's kind actions during the island exam still remained in her mind, but she needed to follow Ryuuen's orders.

"U-Ugh..." Kushida received the treatment with a slightly pained look.

"Now, now. I don't think you need to hold her down like that anymore, Ibuki-san," said Ichinose.

Ibuki turned to Ryuuen for confirmation. Ryuuen snuck a glance towards Ayanokouji before responding.

"It's alright, Ibuki. Eavesdropping is a bad practice, but Kikyou doesn't deserve such rough treatment," he smiled.

After Ibuki let go, Kushida held her left elbow with a bitter smile.

"I'm sorry, I didn't really mean to eavesdrop. As you can probably tell, I just got here when Ibuki-san and the rest spotted me. I knew the meeting would be held in secret, so I tried to sneak around while walking through the hallways. However, I planned to show myself to everyone once I reached the place," she bowed. "That's the truth, I promise."

Kushida apologized instead of acting upset. Such actions amplified the little guilt that Ibuki felt.

"Normally, barging in without an invitation would result in punishment." Ryuuen approached Kushida with a sinister smile.

"However, I can make an exception just for you."



He held Kushida's chin and drew his face close.

Everyone sensed that Ryuuen was really going for it.

"H-Huh? Ryuuen-kun-?" Kushida pushed Ryuuen away without dropping her act.

"Hey, Ryuuen."

The Class D guys stiffened seeing Ryuuen's bold move. Ichinose and Horikita panicked momentarily while Kanzaki called out to him. Ibuki was the only one who stayed composed.

Meanwhile, Ayanokouji didn't even move an inch to stop Ryuuen. However, his gaze wandered off to the blue ocean. Ibuki saw this as she was observing him secretly.

"Wow! You're quite forward, aren't you, Ryuuen-kun? Too bad your advances got rejected," commented Ichinose.

Ryuuen pulled himself away with a satisfied snort.

"Hehh... I usually go for the fierce ones, but a shy maiden ain't too bad." Ryuuen gave the audience a side-eye.

"That wasn't funny just now, Ryuuen-kun, even as a joke," Kushida scolded, still using her angelic persona.

Since no one really knew her true nature unlike Ayanokouji did, everyone felt like her kind and unoffended reaction was perfectly normal.

"Pack it up, you oafs. We're done here," said Ryuuen.

He left with his classmates in tow as if nothing happened. Seeing how nonchalant their enemy was, Horikita and Ichinose immediately whipped up their own meeting schedule.

"Do you want to continue talking here, or should we meet up at a later date," Ichinose asked with a smile.

"I think taking this conversation later is best," answered Horikita.

"Alright~! Let's talk about the specifics in due time. See you later, Horikita-san. See ya, Ayanokouji-kun, Kikyou-chan!" Ichinose joyfully waved at them. "Let's go, Kanzaki-kun."

"See you later." Kanzaki gave them a slight nod before following Ichinose.

The Class B students were left on the scene with an air of awkward silence.

"Um, sorry, Horikita-san. I guess I shouldn't have come here." Kushida apologized once again.

"I don't think it matters whether you were here or not. Ryuuen-kun didn't have much to say, to begin with." Horikita elegantly brushed her hair aside.

"You're gonna have your meeting with Ichinose later, right? Do I need to be there?" asked Ayanokouji.

"Hmm... To be honest, your presence should help my judgment. I would like to have a classmate's opinion."



"That's unlike you, Horikita. Are you not confident about making the best possible decision?"

"If it was the old me, then I'd never ask for help. However, we've already talked about this. It would've been fine if I was sure that Ryuen-kun was just bluffing. However, with how that conversation went earlier, it's best to stay on guard."

"Well, to be fair, you've been focusing on the offense-- trying to find the pattern and all. Thinking about defending against Ryuen might be too much, even for you."

Horikita pursed her lips in frustration. She recognized her weakness, but of course, she found it hard to admit out loud.

"Would you mind taking Hirata?"

"Hirata-kun?"

"Hirata Yousuke. He's our classmate," Ayanokouji replied sarcastically.

"Are you dumb? I know who Hirata-kun is. I didn't forget about him." Horikita gazed down, narrowing her eyes. "Actually, I might have forgotten about him for a moment."

Her tone was filled with seriousness and innocence. She wasn't joking at all.

"Oi..." Ayanokouji sighed with shrug. As he expected, it seems like Horikita Suzune has yet to recognize anyone as a reliable ally apart from him. "You two are going to be the backbone of the class in the future. You can't expect me to be there all the time. Take this exam as an example. I'm borderline useless because I don't really know how you're planning to move things forward. I did nothing but relax starting on the second day."

"So you didn't relax on the first day?" Horikita raised an eyebrow.

"I helped you guys for a bit, right? I'd feel bad if I literally did nothing," answered Ayanokouji.

*"Didn't you help us during the second day, too? Striking a deal with Ichinose-san and solving Karuizawa-san's problem is considered 'relaxing', huh?"* she thought.

"For the time being, I will meet up with Hirata-kun and try to get his help."

"Don't just try-- do it. Hirata would happily give his assistance." Ayanokouji bantered lazily. "Well, that would be ideal, but I understand that you can't do it instantly. Take your time if you need it, but if Ryuen really has something up his sleeve, you might want to speed things up."

"Thank you for your advice." Horikita turned around to leave. "Well then."

Ayanokouji and Kushida saw her off with bitter smiles.

"Are you sure about leaving this to her?" Kushida asked curiously.



It's not that she didn't trust Horikita. However, Kushida believed that she was still outmatched when pitted against someone like Ryuen. After all, he's not afraid to use underhanded tactics.

"She'll deliver, I know it."

"Well, isn't that nice? You trust Horikita-san so much."

"You should, too. Apart from yourself, she's the one protecting your identity from Ryuen, you know? We'd be lucky if Horikita can mislead the enemies."

"I suppose you're right..." Kushida turned to Ayanokouji with a grumpy grimace. "I haven't forgotten, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Hm?"

The two of them started walking back to the cabins.

"Why didn't you stop Ryuen-kun earlier? He almost kissed me, you know?!" she pouted.

"That would be uncharacteristic of me. There's no way I can act affected. If I did something, wouldn't Ryuen target you even more?"

"How cold..." Kushida shrugged with a sigh.

She can only smile bitterly as she fully expected his answer. Kushida thought that Ayanokouji wouldn't act without a purpose. Besides, he still thought about her future well-being by restraining himself.

However, she still felt quite upset.

"You owe me an ice cream," she murmured.

"Then, do you wanna go grab some?"

"Huh...? W-Why do I feel like you're much more excited now...?"

"What are you talking about...?"

"Hmmp...!" Kushida pouted cutely as they went up to the upper decks.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 9.4 - The Peak of a Monolith

Rest Day, 6:00 PM.

Hirata-kun and I were invited for an early dinner. Of course, the invitation was from Ichinose-san and Kanzaki-kun. It was finally time for us to discuss the upcoming climax of this exam.

"Now then. How do we take Ryuen-kun's words?" asked Ichinose-san.

"In the little time that we of Class C have mulled over the situation, we've surmised that there's still a big chance Ryuen was bluffing," said Kanzaki-kun.

"Horikita-san and I have talked about this, too. Both of us can agree based on the evidence," followed Hirata-kun. "Would you mind filling them in, Horikita-san?"

"Of course," I replied. "I'm sure you've already figured it out by now, but the VIP from the Horse Group is someone from our class. By extension, the VIP from the Cow is someone from your class."

"Yes, we won't deny that." Kanzaki-kun answered with a nod.

"However, it's easy to spot the trick behind Ryuen-kun's deduction," I said, looking at Ichinose-san.

"Yep~. Katsuragi-kun is working with Ryuen-kun, right? Then he could've just revealed the 3 groups that Class A's VIPs belong to. Doing that would eliminate 6 groups and the last 6 would naturally belong to our classes." Ichinose-san explained it without much issue. I guess something like this is child's play for her.

"That's why we've concluded that Ryuen's implication shouldn't pose much of a threat," added Kanzaki-kun.

Ryuen-kun left out one group from Class C along with our Dragon Group... I still don't understand his reason for doing so. That said, it was certainly a blessing in disguise.

"Well, we say that, but there's no way we're letting our guards down. We have to protect our VIPs until the very end."

The serious look on Ichinose-san's face made something clear...

"Ichinose-san... You still haven't given up, have you?" I said. "You still plan to win by finding the VIPs in different groups."

Ryuen-kun and Katsuragi-kun-- both of them, including me, already guessed that Class C had something in mind.



"Ahahaha, of course, Horikita-san. Staying idle won't do us any good, after all," she said. "I don't know what Class A is doing, but if we don't take Ryuen-kun into account, you're the only opponent that we're most wary of. After all, unlike them, you're really trying to find the pattern. We wouldn't have been too threatened by your efforts, but you have a fourth name in your arsenal. I personally can't do an estimate on how much it helps you since we gave up on trying to find the pattern, but we had no other choice than to take a gamble."

Finding the VIPs without finding the pattern...

"A gamble in which Class C will win if Horikita-san can't figure out the VIP before the exam ends, right, Ichinose-san?" asked Hirata-kun.

"Yes," she nodded.

"By that logic, you must be planning something massive on the last day."

"On the last group discussion, to be exact. It's not that massive, but it is a straightforward plan that requires the innate social and cold-reading abilities of my classmates."

"Ichinose-san, is it possible for you to tell us the specifics of your plan?"

Her words were like honey. They tempted us into asking for more. With that, I immediately knew that I fell for Ichinose-san's bait.

"Of course!" Ichinose-san narrowed her eyes with a smirk. "If we win, we'll choose to spare Class B. In exchange, in the event where Class C loses the gamble and Class B figures out the pattern before the exam ends, I want you to spare our class instead."

"You know that we can just lie about this promise, right?" I inquired.

"That much is obvious, no? However, if that happens, then we'll gladly take the loss while it's early. At least we'd know that Class B cannot be trusted."

Like Ayanokouji-kun, Ichinose-san thought about the long game. That's why she didn't bother asking for a contract.

"Alright, we promise. Class B will not submit the names of any VIPs from Class C. However, this deal is severely disadvantageous for our class. Since we're thinking about the future, then we'll expect some compensation down the line."

"You can count on us! We'll definitely pay you guys back."

Ichinose-san's vibrant smile didn't fade. She gladly started laying out their plan. As expected, it was extremely simple, yet terrifyingly effective in the hands of the right people.



Day 1, 9:30 PM.

"Everyone, we've successfully made our initial negotiations with Class B!"

Inside the private lounge were fourteen students including Ichinose, Kanzaki, and Tsube. Apart from Dragon Group members who were all present, Class C only chose one student to represent the eleven remaining groups.

"That said, I'd like to remind everyone about the task I've given you earlier. Feel free to decline, though." Prioritizing her classmates' autonomy, Ichinose gives them the option to refuse anything in a joking manner. "For the duration of the exam, I want everyone to become friends with their groupmates."

"That's just such an Ichinose-like task," commented Tokitou Katsumi. "Don't worry about it, Ichinose. We've been doing just that."

Ichinose nodded gratefully.

"I know it sounds silly but making more friends means more information. Of course, I'm not telling you to create fake friendships. Taking advantage of others or manipulating them isn't our goal here. I want you to genuinely befriend those who are in your group. If you gain any sort of crucial information regarding the exam, you're all free to completely hide them from me or anyone," she explained with a smile. "For now, I just want you to get along with them."

"I understand that the main goal is to make friends. However, if we're not doing this for psychological manipulation or any sort of deceptive tactic, then may I ask the point of this in terms of winning the exam?" asked Hamaguchi, who sensed that there must be something more to Ichinose's so-called 'task'.

"Perfect question, Hamaguchi-kun." Ichinose comically pointed at him. "Don't worry, everyone. I'm doing this with every intention to win, but the truth of this plan doesn't need to be known just yet. If we still haven't figured out the VIPs from other groups by the Rest Day, then that'll be the time for me to reveal everything!"

Ichinose's confidence and charisma told them that things will be alright if they leave everything to her. They knew their leader had a plan. As long they do their part, they can entrust the call-making to her.

"Before the designated Rest Day, it's better for everyone to focus on naturally socializing. That's why we decided to leave everyone in the dark for the moment. I hope that much is clear," nodded Kanzaki.

"Ohh, interesting."

"Alright, Ichinose-san. You can count on us!"

"Somehow, this feels really thrilling."

Class C came to an agreement without much trouble. Because of Ichinose's reassuring presence, everyone in her class had been on the same page.



"Class C had used the first and second days to expand its connections. Of course, we genuinely wanted our classmates to make new friends, so this strategy was a convenient way to go about it," explained Kanzaki-kun.

There weren't any downsides to the initial phase of this strategy. All they did was make friends. Naturally, the students from other classes had their guards up. However, since Class C had no idea what Ichinose-san had in mind, her classmates would obviously have no ulterior motives. Since Ichinose-san's strategy didn't involve finding the pattern, all she needed to worry about was the other classes figuring it out before she moves forward with her proposition.

"And then, since ten out of twelve groups we're still in the exam, I can finally tell my classmates the second part of my plan," said Ichinose-san.

Rest Day, 2:00 PM.

*"We'll probably have to make this quick, everyone. Kanzaki-kun and I have a meeting with Ryuen-kun."*

*"Honami..."*

*"It's alright, Shibata-kun. I won't let your efforts get wasted."*

*"I know you won't. Kozue's doing better, too. She really had it rough," said Shibata.*

*He still participated in the meeting even though the Monkey Group was already finished. Minamikata, his groupmate and the VIP of the Monkey Group felt quite guilty about getting found out.*

*"Kozue-chan didn't need to feel bad at all. No one in our class blames her for what happened. And Class B was kind enough to offer us a deal."*

*Most of them had bitter smiles. In exchange for a supposed gain of 500,000 private points, at least they got their 50 class points back. They couldn't really blame anyone, not even Kouenji. After all, he found her out fair and square. Class C knew that Minamikata wasn't an open book that could be read easily. That's why they're extremely wary of Kouenji now, especially since they were aware that he's not the type to work with his own class.*

*"That said, we finally have a chance to turn things around. Tomorrow, Class C will commence the last phase of the plan." Ichinose's confident smile brought life to the class's morale.*

*"And that is?" Nakanishi asked excitedly.*

*"I call it 'Flipping the Cards Over'~!" announced Ichinose.*

*"Ohhh...!"*

*Naturally, her classmate's reaction was that of curiosity and intrigue.*

*"We can't tamper with the emails from the school, right? Then, whatever it says will be absolute truth. We've figured that out a long time*



ago." Ichinose gave her classmates a side-eye.

Some of them were starting to see what she had in mind. And with that, Kanzaki continued the explanation. Whenever Ichinose hands the mic over to Kanzaki so he can explain the details, Class C understood that it was finally time for them to pay attention seriously.

"For all the groups where none of the Class C students is the VIP, you'll work together in forcefully uncovering their identity. And by that, I mean persuading your groupmates to reveal the emails they got from the school."

Being chosen as their group's representative meant that they were capable. Such capabilities were immediately shown through their resolute composure.

At that moment, they thought about what this plan entails. As long as you're not the VIP, you would have nothing to hide. If they can persuade all the non-VIPs to show their phones, finding the true VIP will be nothing but a walk in the park.

"For the remaining groups where the VIPs are from our class, you can either act as usual or try to mislead the enemies." Kanzaki scanned the room and observed his classmates' reactions before concluding the instructions. "You are free to come up with your own methods in executing this strategy. After all, only you can judge how much influence and persuasive power you have to solicit your groupmates' cooperation."

"If you're worried about hurting your friends should they turn out to be the VIP, all you need to do is set the premise that you intended to win, right from the very start. It doesn't matter whether you're direct or indirect about it. If they recognize that what you're doing is for your class, then they'd understand why you'd execute this plan," said Ichinose. "In the end, we'll be fighting fair and square. If they hold a grudge against you or spite you for doing so, then they might have not recognized you as a friend in the first place."

It was a fundamentally fair and square fight. If you don't take the initiative, you won't gain any advantage. That's what Class C had been preparing for, all this time. They didn't make friends with their groupmates only to betray them, but doing so gave them enough initiative to control the climactic situation.

"That's true. I wouldn't want to be friends with someone close-minded," commented Sumida.

"My groupmates back in the Pig Group are super competitive. I'm sure they'll understand!" followed Asako.

"If you feel really bad about cornering the VIP, you can always propose to get Outcome #1, you know? Wouldn't everyone win some private points if that happens? That said, if someone from another class turns traitor, then that would be your own defeat." Ichinose finished her piece with a smile.



Understanding what Ichinose wanted them to accomplish, the Class C students readily agreed.

Outside of increasing their connections and potential allies for the future, they finally understood why Ichinose wanted them to make friends with their groupmates. Depending on their ability to sway the majority's opinion, Class C might just be able to win everything.

To be honest, I had goosebumps. This was tantamount to a large-scale offensive, but at the same time, it wasn't.

Since only one class had the VIP, the other three would most likely join. Given the rewards and their class's internal strife, it wouldn't be hard for the sociable and persuasive students of Class C to convince Class A students to join the fray should the VIP not belong in their class. And if the VIP was keeping their identities even from their classmates, the unknowing members of that class will naturally join the bandwagon.

At that moment, the VIP would be at the mercy of everyone else.

Hirata-kun didn't look surprised after hearing Ichinose-san's plan.

"You see, Kushida-san and I have thought of a similar plan yesterday, but even we would be hard-pressed to actually put everything in motion. As expected of Ichinose-san, I guess," commented Hirata-kun. "Ah, sorry for not informing you, Horikita-san. We didn't want to ruin your focus on finding the pattern."

With such a considerate and thoughtful mindset, he could only smile bitterly. To think that we'd be on the receiving end of the plan that they also came up with.

I see... Of course, they were also thinking of ways to win the exam. It was foolish of me to think about working alone just because Ayanokouji-kun wasn't there to help. I had other allies.

Once again, Ayanokouji-kun was right.

"After hearing about your plan, I can see why you're fine with sharing this with us. Even if we warn our classmates or ask them to cooperate with you, it's quite unlikely for any of them to turn traitor with absolute confidence due to the risks. In contrast, since Class C became quite close with their groupmates, they'll have a much easier time to distinguish whether they're being misled or lied to," I elaborated. "In other words, unless we do something, Class C might achieve total victory."

Ichinose-san responded with a silent smile. Her strategy was fair because it gave everyone the chance to turn traitor once the VIP or their class gets cornered. However, the initial phase of her plan gave them the psychological advantage in terms of making sure whose name they'd have to submit. Not only that, the connections that they've made will surely come in handy for future tests...

And to think that she came up with this on the very first day...



She was someone who didn't need to use underhanded tactics in order to win. Her sheer amount of influence and charisma gave her enough power to concoct such a plan and execute it without much difficulty. This was something that only Ichinose Honami could pull off.

They were the original Class B and she was their leader. I can clearly see why that's the case now.

Really... What a terrifying opponent.

*Author's Notes:*

*Honami's plan in CotE: Alter is an enhanced version of her plan in the canon.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 9.5 - The Marionette

*(20:19) [If things go wrong, you'll receive the names tomorrow in accordance with the agreement.]*

*(20:19) [Don't worry.]*

*(20:19) [Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun.]*

After rereading the last parts of our message, I finally turned my phone off. Light footsteps could be heard from behind me.

"Are you trying to be poetic by asking to meet in the same place and time?"

I could brush her comments off like I normally would, but for some reason, those words made me think.

"Who knows?" I flatly replied.

"Hmph. Well, I guess there's no time for idle talk. We're still at risk, even at this place. Let's get this over with."

It was already 11:00 PM of the Rest Day. On the same unmonitored part of the ship, I secretly met up with Class B's adviser, Chabashira Sae-sensei.

"Alright. First off, I want to know what happened with that guy?" I asked.

"Ah, that shop clerk? He quit his job for reasons that he wanted to keep for himself." Chabashira-sensei had a slightly disgusted expression as she answered my question.

"I see. That's good enough," I sighed.

"He assaulted a minor. You can press worse charges if you wanted. And if Sakura's concern is getting unnecessary attention, it's easy to keep the victim's identity."

"That's for her to decide. And her decision was to forget about that guy. Of course, I also believe that he needs to pay for his crimes, but we'd be troubling ourselves more. If Sakura is satisfied with the results, there's no reason for me to get involved any further," I replied. "You didn't tell anyone about this, did you?"

"Of course not. If other teachers learn about that incident, they'd probably stick their noses in. It'll be a pain for me, too," she shrugged.

"Thank you for being understanding." My show of gratitude was sincere, albeit my tone.

"You're very welcome." Chabashira-sensei accepted my dry thanks. "Let's move on with the next one then."



She approached me with slow steps, handing over a single cellular phone.

"He's a busy man, but he made time for you. Take this chance to say everything you want."

I received the phone and saw that the call was one tap away. When I pressed the call button, it only took a few seconds before the other end answered.

*"Hello? I'm assuming that this is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun?"*

The gentle voice of the same middle-aged man rang inside my ears.

"Good evening, Chairman Sakayanagi."

*"I didn't expect you to make contact with me so soon. According to Chabashira-sensei, you wanted my name and influence for a certain action."*

"Yes, that is right."

*"I see. Firstly, I apologize for only having this inconvenient schedule for you. I'm sure you could understand how troublesome everything is right now. I simply cannot arrange a personal meeting for the next few months."*

"Of course. I sincerely appreciate the time you've given me tonight."

*"Alright. Then do tell me about this so-called request."*

"Right. So as to not waste time, you'll hear the nitty-gritty details from Chabashira-sensei herself. She will also do all of the work involved so no rules would be broken. All I need is your approval for the job. After all, we can't possibly convince them without backing from a higher power such as yourself."

Doing something that involves a student with the outside world is still against the rules. I can't imagine an exception for that. So, I asked Chabashira-sensei, a teacher, to do what needed to be done. After all, she isn't bound by such a rule.

The two of us emotionlessly stared at each other. I already told her the specifics, so she was just hearing my demands for a second time. Chabashira-sensei already agreed to do everything.

It took around five seconds of silence before I finally heard a response.

*"Hmm... Alright. I'm sure you're smart enough to not endanger anything with regards to the school. And besides, since you managed to supplicate a teacher's help, then I guess I don't have anything to worry about in that regard,"* he sighed. *"I understand. I permit you to make use of my name this once."*

How decisive. And he's talking like he's doing this for free. As if I could possibly believe that.

"Now then, for your terms..."



"Oh...?" He never asked for anything in return, but I still uttered such words. I can faintly imagine a smile forming on his face. *"Well, I guess it's not that hard to figure out, especially for someone like you. I admire your initiative, Ayanokouji-kun."*

"There's a limit to what a student like me could give but--"

*"--the future you doesn't have that limit."*

What a sly old man.

*"Don't worry about it too much, Ayanokouji-kun. Just keep this favor in mind for now. I'll expect something in return when the time comes."*

I knew exactly what cards I had. So naturally, I also knew that this was the only card that I could possibly use while negotiating with him.

A favor from the future me, huh? I wonder how that would go?

"Okay. If you can get their approval for it, then that's all I care about."

*"Sure, I'll do my best to negotiate."*

"Thank you very much."

*"You're welcome."*

With his status, I doubt negotiations are even necessary. They'd probably give him permission to do as he pleases with smiles on their faces.

When I returned the phone to Chabashira-sensei, she pressed the mute button before addressing me.

"How goes the exam, Ayanokouji?" she asked.

"Don't worry, everything's going according to plan."

"Your plan?" Chabashira-sensei raised an eyebrow.

"Me? I'm not even helping my groupmates. I left everything to Horikita this time. If I can give her the spotlight before I step down, the class should recognize her as a worthy leader."

"You're really stepping down, huh?"

"We have enough points for it. Even if things don't go as smoothly when I'm gone, and even if something devastating happens that compromises our class points, it'll be easy to take back."

"And you think Horikita and the others can take those points back without you?"

"As they are now, it'll be hard. But the upcoming battles will polish their abilities. The class is already strong on its own if I'm being completely honest. Even if the enemies grow at the same rate as them, the class will be able to keep up as long as they continue to fix their flaws."

"Yes, I know that much."

"I'll prevent anything from going terribly wrong, but you can't expect me to help every time. Doing that would be, quite frankly, unfair for the other classes."



Chabashira-sensei smirked with a light snort. My statement was arrogant and ridiculous, but it was also the undeniable truth. Even if she didn't know the root of my confidence, the results spoke for themselves.

"You were testing yourself, right?" Chabashira-sensei gave me a side glance. "It seems like you've found your answer."

"To be honest, it was pretty underwhelming, but I can't really do anything about it. Right now, I just want to have a peaceful high school life," I sighed.

"I see." Chabashira-sensei turned around before marching back towards the cabins. "Thank you, Ayanokouji. I may have used your abilities to drag this class from the bottom, but I sincerely hope that your wish comes true. I'm aware that my past desires are uncontrollably strong-- strong enough to be considered pitiful and pathetic... But I'm still a teacher. The least I could do is acknowledge my students' wishes."

I don't know what happened in her past nor was I interested. But giving her this kind of temporary satisfaction wouldn't feel fulfilling in the long run. She will realize that soon enough.

"You're welcome, Chabashira-sensei. And thank you, too."

She responded with a genuine and unfeigned smile. It was enough to make any man's heart race.

"I'll be going on ahead to discuss everything with the chairman. Don't linger around for too long lest you want to get chewed out."

"Will do," I shrugged. "Good night, Sensei."

The sound of her heels hitting against the floor slowly faded. I was, once again, alone. If things go well after this exam, my so-called "*Self-Test*" will finally come to a halt. While thinking about the near future, I looked at another group conversation on my phone.

The group chat consisted of four students, including me.

(21:27) *[We've negotiated with them, Ayanokouji-kun.]*

(21:27) *[They were willing to cooperate.]*

(21:27) *[Well, I guess that's a given.]*

(21:27) *[You've already done the heavy lifting, anyway.]*

(21:27) *[Right, Ayanokouji?]*

(21:28) *[Yeah, everything is finally in place for tomorrow.]*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 10.1 - The Final Conclave

August 14th, Final Day of the Zodiac Test.

We were scheduled to disembark tomorrow morning, so the bustling crowd of students reverberated throughout the large halls. Since a luxurious summer vacation on a fancy cruise ship felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most students, they wanted to make the best out of the experience.

"Everyone's awfully relaxed, huh?"

"Must be nice for the ones who're already finished with the exam. They practically have nothing to worry about apart from the results."

"What do you think, Ayanokouji?"

In an open-air restaurant on the 9th Deck, I was currently hanging out with Sugawara and Ueno, two male classmates of mine.

"I can't say... Horikita's doing all the work this time around, after all," I replied.

"Hmm, I guess that's true. I'm also down to believe that a pattern exists for the VIPs. So if Horikita-san really manages to find that pattern, Class B would win by an overwhelming margin," said Sugawara.

Ueno only chuckled in response.

"I can only imagine Horikita-san's face when she read the messages on the class group chat last night," he said.

"Ayanokouji, do you think she felt flustered?" asked Sugawara.

"Probably," I shrugged.

Horikita's leadership on the current exam was a hot topic last night. Since only a handful of students were aware of it, the news came off as a surprise for most of our classmates. Thanks to Kikyou and the others' help, we managed to amplify the fact that Horikita was doing most of the work while I stayed on the sidelines. Of course, there were some jokes about me slacking off, but I didn't really mind. It was the truth, anyway-- kind of.

"Horikita's doing really well, especially with Hirata and Kikyou's help. I don't think the class needs to worry about anything," I said.

"Yeah. Once Horikita-san finds the answer, we'll be there to follow up."

"The class has made that clear last night. We're right behind her-- she just needs to tell us what to do."



I'm glad her position in class was slowly getting cemented in place.

Our casual talks continued until the other guys from our class joined in.

It didn't take long before lunchtime arrived. This time, I made plans with my groupmates. The three of us were pleasantly surprised because Horikita was the one who invited us.

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun!"

"Hey there, Ayanokouji-kun."

Kikyou and Hirata greeted me with their usual smiles. Meanwhile, Horikita did nothing but stare at me with her classic neutral expression. It seems like I was still the last one to get here even though I arrived 10 minutes before our designated meeting time...

That said, we immediately started to discuss the matters at hand.

"First of all, I would like to know how your progress is going, Horikita."

"Yes," she nodded. "My progress is steady, all thanks to you getting Minamikata-san's name back on the first day. However, I'm sure all of the people who got an additional name are stuck on the same stage."

"Horikita-san is right. We've been brainstorming about the last variable together since yesterday. Until now, we still can't figure out the qualifications to become a VIP," followed Kikyou.

"Mn... Ichinose-san got Karuizawa-san's name during the night of the second day, so theoretically, Horikita-san has a whole 24-hour lead. But if we assume that Katsuragi-kun has an additional one or two names in his hand, we'd probably be in trouble," added Hirata.

"I see... And I'm sure you're worried about what Ryuen's up to, as well." I held my chin and contemplated the current situation.

"I know you're not helping us out and we won't ask for your help when we've come this far on our own... But I would like to know if you've figured anything out," asked Horikita.

"I actually have."

My response caused them to stiffen.

"Thank you for answering. I won't ask any further," she said.

"Did you find out the pattern, Kiyotaka-kun?!" Kikyou asked enthusiastically.

"Who knows?" I shrugged.

"Ehh? You're so stingy!" she pouted.

Horikita shook her head in dismay while Hirata only laughed softly. Whether they think I know the pattern or not isn't really important. I've already made it clear that I had no intention of



helping them.

"I guess that much is expected," sighed Horikita.

"Do you think we have a chance of winning?" asked Hirata.

"Of course," I nodded slightly. "You shouldn't underestimate yourselves, you know?"

"I'm personally not underestimating myself or my groupmates. I believe we'd come out on top if we were all fairly playing on the same field," said Horikita. "However, this is a race against time."

Horikita got Minamikata's name on the first day. According to Hashimoto, Katsuragi got one VIP name from Ryuen during the second day, so they should at least know four names, including the three from their own respective classes. The same goes for Ichinose who got Karuizawa's name during the second day. The fight is certainly on equal grounds, theoretically speaking.

Given the advantages that she got on the first day, Horikita's confidence wasn't unfounded. However, she's also correct about her second point. If things end in a stalemate and Outcome #2 gets triggered for all the remaining groups, the class standings will stay the same. Class A might have the chance to retaliate and widen the gap on future exams.

"You're probably right..." I replied, looking at Horikita straight in the eyes. "Since everyone who's trying to figure out the pattern is stuck in the same rut, then the school must've been pretty successful with the exam."

The three cocked their heads in wonder.

"Just don't overthink things too much. They've given us instructions to finish the exam, right? Maybe you should come back to that. It might help," I said.

"Hmm... All of us collectively thought that the instructions were just formality, though," replied Hirata.

"Yes, I personally didn't find anything helpful from it," followed Horikita.

"Maybe so. That's just my personal take on the matter. If the pattern isn't showing itself, maybe you need to look at it from another perspective."

"What kind of perspective?" asked Hirata.

"It depends on the person. You just have to use your eyes."

"I see..." Horikita held her chin with a pondering look.

"Trying to find the pattern means you're going up against the school itself. If you think about it from that angle, maybe the answer would get clearer," I said. "Well, the pattern aside, I believe you guys have something more troublesome to worry about," I said.

"You mean Ichinose-san?" Now, it was Hirata who smiled bitterly.

"Ohh, Honami-chan, huh...?" muttered Kikyuu.



"If I don't find the pattern in time, Ichinose-san and her class will probably have more winning chances even if their final plan is situational at best," said Horikita.

"I think it's fine if you leave Class C's plan to us, Horikita-san. While you prioritize getting the VIPs' names, Kushida-san and I will try to come up with something. I'm sure the class will cooperate if needed."

"Alright, I understand," nodded Horikita.

I know Horikita still isn't too comfortable about working closely with other people, but she has to start somewhere. I'm sure Hirata and Kikyou know that she's still trying to adjust even though she's not showing it on her face. Those two are experts in reading the room anyway, so they can probably gauge how much space Horikita needs whenever they're together.

It's an ability that I can only hope of having.

"I assume you three will stick together for the rest of the day then?" I asked.

It's probably the best thing to do, especially today-- much like how Ichinose, Kanzaki, and Tsube are always together, same with Katsuragi and his classmates.

"I think it'd be ideal because depending on the circumstances, everyone's plans might shift in unexpected directions," answered Hirata.

"Then I guess we don't have anything to worry about," I said, leaning back on my seat.

"If we win, Horikita-san's status as the leader will be solidified!" Kikyou followed with a big smile.

"I think our classmates trust you enough, Horikita-san. When they learned about our group's current situation, most of them voiced their supports," followed Hirata.

"Support, huh? Well, the commotion in our class's group chat was instigated by Kushida-san. It only made sense that a lot of them agreed." Horikita gave Kikyou a sharp look.

"Ehehe..." Kikyou scratched her head nervously.

Our talks continued and encompassed a lot of the things that didn't even need to be talked about. We've spent a little over four months together in this school but it was debatable whether it felt like we've been together for a much longer time or whether it felt like the entrance ceremony just happened yesterday.

Since I've never experienced anything like this before, it certainly felt fresh and new.

"I have one thing to ask of you, Horikita."

Turning the wheels back to the important matters, I spoke up towards Class B's future leader.



"What is it?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"After you've figured out the pattern, you must inform the three of us before making any moves."

"That much is obvious. I'll be sure to tell you when I've done it," she replied.

The moment I said those words, Horikita finally caught on to something.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 10.2 - Closer to the Truth

Final Day, 1:00 PM.

Despite this being the last day of the exam, it didn't seem like anything was going to change.

Katsuragi and his classmates stayed in their corner, minding their own business, waiting for the hour to pass by. Ryuen was currently speaking to him, though I don't know what they were talking about.

"Ayanokouji-kun, it's your turn!" Ichinose's voice was filled with energy.

Meanwhile, the seven students from Class B and Class C were sitting on the floor, playing Old Maid.

"O-Oh..." I panicked and quickly grabbed one card from her hand of eight.

As fate would usually toy with me, of course, I'd get the joker.

Well, I guess it's not so bad after seeing Ichinose's pretty grin.

I turned around to have my seatmate take her turn.

"Mmm..."

Kikyou narrowed her eyes as she scrutinized... my face? Is she trying to look at my reactions? She, of all people, should know that doing so is useless.

"What?"

"Nothing." Kikyou turned away with a *'hmpf'*.

Incomprehensible things aside, Kikyou managed to grab a good card and finished her turn.

After more turns, the game ended with Hirata's loss.

"Ahaha, it seems like I've lost." He received his defeat with a smile.

"We've racked up a bunch of losses by this time, huh?" said Kanzaki.

Considering that this was only our third game, he must've counted our games from the other days. Was Kanzaki the type of guy to remember those kinds of things?

"Ayanokouji-kun has the least amount of losses if I remember correctly." Ichinose eyed me with a grin.

"Well, Ayanokouji-kun is pretty hard to read," Tsube commented before giggling.

"I know right? You've only lost twice-- against Kikyou-chan and



Horikita-san respectively."

"If there's anyone who could see through his poker face, it would be them," said Hirata.

Horikita raised an eyebrow while Kikyuu silently listened with a smile.

"Ehhh, you're that close, huh?" Ichinose turned to me. "We've been friends for so long, but I'm still having a hard time reading your face."

"The other way around is also true. I'm sure Andou and the others can read you way better than I can," I replied.

In the end, we're from different classes. We haven't spent as much time together.

"I guess so." Ichinose leaned back, using her arms as support.

For the Dragon Group, the fifth group discussion was business as usual. Everything ended without much commotion, mainly because we never really talked about the exam. Most of the students would probably say that it's over by now-- that no one really won.

Well, the current standings are quite close, and none of the classes are suffering from extremely low points. So for the majority of the first-years, ending in a draw isn't that much of a big deal.

Ignorance is bliss, huh?

"Yo, how's your playtime going?"

Before the end of the session, Ryuuken made his way to our area.

"Ohh, hey there, Ryuuken-kun. We're doing pretty okay over here. How about you and Katsuragi-kun?" Ichinose effortlessly received his greeting like they were close friends.

"Nothing special. We figured that letting you guys run free until the last group discussion is best."

"Really now? What will happen on the last group discussion then?" she asked.

"You'll see." Ryuuken scoffed at Ichinose before turning to Horikita. "You don't seem to have accomplished anything yet, Suzune. You know you can easily win this exam by using the contract, right?"

Ryuuken was bound by a certain contract. There were a lot of specific details, but the main idea was to force Ryuuken's cooperation under some reasonable restrictions. Since that contract wasn't bound by the Memorandum Restriction, Horikita could make use of it during this exam, so Ryuuken was curious as to why she doesn't.

"I'm not that incompetent, Ryuuken-kun. Sure, we might secure our promotion to Class A if I make use of the contract, but the details are tricky, especially if I consider the rules of this exam." Horikita replied with a sharp look on her face before glancing in my direction. "And besides, I'd rather have Ayanokouji-kun decide on



when to use that contract. He earned it on his own, after all."

People would normally be tempted about using such a contract. Depending on how much cooperation is demanded of Ryuen within the set conditions, we might've been able to win the exam easily. But doing so would be short-sighted.

Since Horikita was confident about winning this using her own methods, the contract remains an option for future exams. Personally, I think she'd made the right decision to save that card for later.

"Quite amusing..." Ryuen's sinister grin widened. "But, your resistance is futile. The fact that the result of this exam is already set in stone won't change. Have fun figuring out the pattern that you're all so hung up on."

Ryuen turned around as if the conversation didn't have to do anything with him in the first place.

"Ryuen-kun's behavior is as strange as usual," commented Hirata.

"More like incomprehensible. Since he's teaming up with Katsuragi, it's obvious that they're up to something. However, I can't bring myself to fully believe the things he's telling us. If he figured out the identity of all the VIPs, there wouldn't be any point in delaying things. Even if we believe his reason of *"playing around"*, Katsuragi isn't the type of person who'd tolerate that," added Kanzaki.

"Kanzaki-kun is right. I don't see a point in waiting around if you don't know when someone might actually figure out the pattern. It's like he's so sure that no one will find it," said Ichinose.

"But if we're trying to make sense of Ryuen-kun's actions, wouldn't it be reasonable to say that maybe... just maybe... What if the pattern doesn't exist?" mused Kikyou.

At that moment, Horikita's eyes widened. A wave of sudden realization dawned on her.

"Hmm... Like maybe the school put all those obvious clues to bait us into thinking that a pattern existed?" asked Ichinose.

"Yeah... Maybe the VIP assignment was done at random, after all," answered Kikyou.

"That's certainly a reasonable theory. Given how no one has found the pattern even after piecing the necessary clues together, the possibility of a random selection would definitely come to mind," added Tsube. "All this time, the school might've been giving us clues with the goal of distracting us from the truth."

The sound of chairs rubbing against the floor could be heard as soon as Tsube finished speaking. Katsuragi and his classmates stood up and exited the room, same with Ryuen and the other Class D



guys.

Every one of us stood from our seats. However, it was noticeable that Horikita was trying to rush out.

"H-Horikita-?"

Unfortunately, coupled with Horikita's realization was her collapse. She fell to the side before getting caught by me.

"Horikita-san, are you okay?!" Ichinose approached us with a panicked expression.

The others also voiced their concerns.

"I-I'm fine... I think... I just need some rest."

"You haven't slept a wink, have you?" Hirata asked with a grave expression. "You worked tirelessly yesterday, running around the ship and asking students some questions... But I didn't think you'd continue working all throughout the night."

"I'm sorry, but I'll be fine..."

Hearing her forceful yet gated response, the rest of us chose to not talk further.

And with that, the fifth session was finished. Horikita was hellbent on leaving, so we escorted her to the elevator. I suggested that either Hirata or I would take her all the way to her room, but she refused.

"I think I'm about to figure out the pattern," she said.

Two things felt strange with Horikita's words. Her reaction to the sudden acknowledgment of the "*Random Selection*" theory was noticed by everyone. So, all of them immediately thought that Horikita was swayed by it, albeit for different reasons. But it seems like that wasn't the case right here. Another thing was her current conclusion and confidence. Just what did Horikita realize in the first place?

All of the big clues were laid down.

Even at the cost of efficiency, we were still briefed in a very specific order. They obviously wanted us to see that it mattered. Next, Hoshinomiya-sensei stated that they did consider something to assign the VIPs. It's hard to imagine that the teachers would explicitly lie to the students. They would structure the instructions in a way that would mislead us, but they wouldn't say anything false. In conjunction with that, Hoshinomiya-sensei also stressed the fact that the school is impartial about everything, so it was obvious that the number of VIPs was equally distributed among all classes. This fact was also confirmed with the help of our alliance with Class C.

On top of all those clues, everyone knew 4 of the VIPs' identities.

They considered everything and left nothing. But where did that leave Katsuragi, Hashimoto, Ichinose, Kanzaki, and Horikita? They



were all stuck on the same dead end.

"Are you sure, Horikita-san?" Her surprised reaction lasted for a split second. Ichinose's face turned serious.

"I'm about 90% confident," replied Horikita.

Kanzaki and Tsube had worried expressions, but Ichinose remained calm.

"Then it would be great if you could honor our agreement. We'll definitely pay you back in the future," she said.

Ichinose's classmates didn't seem convinced by her composure. If the identities of all the remaining VIPs were uncovered, their plan would've been all for naught. They wouldn't even have the chance to implement it. Not only that. Even if Horikita cracks the code while leaving Class C alone, they still had Class A and D to worry about. However, Ichinose didn't seem concerned at all.

"Yes... it's regrettable, but I have to rest first. My mind and body wouldn't be able to function if I try to force myself any longer." With Hirata and Kikyou in charge of defense, Horikita will have to go on the offense all by herself.

She turned around and walked away. Despite the fact that she almost collapsed, her hurried steps still exuded elegance and poise.

"Horikita-san is amazing, isn't she?" Hirata watched her walk away with a smile along with Kikyou.

"You can say that again." Ichinose grinningly shrugged her shoulders.

It's just as I expected. I'm looking forward to how you'll deliver the finale, Horikita Suzune.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 11.1 - The Two of Us

Around half an hour before the final discussion...

I decided to come to the meeting room early after hanging out with Nishimura-- or rather, Ryuuko. A bunch of things happened and now, we're on a first-name basis.

I spoke softly, on the phone while walking down the 2nd deck's hallway.

*"It's fortunate that our group was structured the way it is. To Horikita-san, I must've been the only viable option."*

"Did she give you guys a specific time?"

*"No... She must've taken my connection with you into account. You can't really negotiate with the rest of us. It'd only raise more questions regarding your motives."*

"You're right. Once Horikita sends the names, everyone would be eager to submit their answers. This calls for Plan B then."

*"Yes, I'll try to stall our classmates for as long as I can by raising doubts about Horikita-san's answer. Besides, I think everyone would still prefer to know her explanations. You can contact the others while I'm at it."*

And once Horikita's explanation convinces them, it'll only strengthen their trust for her in the future since she'll surely get the pattern right.

"Alright. I'll leave it to you, Matsushita."

*"Of course. I'll be in contact with Kei-chan as well."*

I've assigned Matsushita for recon but Karuizawa had a much bigger role. That said, I was good friends with both of them so I also know how close they were with each other. The sudden "Kei-chan" caught me off-guard.

"Kei-chan? When did you guys get so buddy-buddy with each other?"

*"Ah, it was a recent thing-- like, yesterday, to be exact. During the Rest Day, Kei-chan and I had the opportunity to hang out a lot, along with Chiyo-chan and Kayoko-chan."*

Sonoda and Ishikura, huh? That's interesting. After all, they were both on the shy end of the spectrum.

Well, Sonoda was already in Matsushita's extended clique along with Ichihashi, Azuma, and Yokoyama, so it made sense for her to be there. However, Ishikura was in Kikyuu's group. She was often



intimidated by the presence of girls like Karuizawa, so this sudden development was quite strange.

*"What's with that silence? It's nothing weird, you know? Kayoko-chan may not be as strong-willed as Maya or Satsuki, but she idolizes Kei-chan quite a bit."*

Matsushita called me out. She knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Idolizes?"

*"Kushida-san haven't told you anything yet? Apparently, when her group encountered Kei-chan's group yesterday, something amazing happened."*

"And that is...?"

*"Kei-chan apologized."*

"Oh..."

*"I was shocked as well. Anyway, Rino and the others didn't seem too surprised. It seems like Kei-chan had done the same with some girls in Class D."*

"So it happened after Karuizawa apologized to the girls in Kikyou's group?"

*"I've asked Kei-chan about what exactly happened. She said something about admitting her rude and passive-aggressive behavior for the past months."*

"And by idolize, you mean Ishikura admired her straightforward and mature apology...?"

*"Yeah, basically. After their groups made up-- Well I don't know if you can call it making up since there wasn't any real conflict, to begin with. And it's not like their initial impression of Kei-chan would change that easily..."*

Well, I guess that much is obvious.

In fact, Kikyou mentioned something about it, albeit vaguely. Knowing how much she dislikes girls like Karuizawa (or her outer personality, at least), I can understand why she didn't want to talk about what happened. That said, Kikyou would probably tell me about it if she decided to vent yesterday.

*"Anyway, after that all went down, they hung out for a while before our own group joined up with them."*

"That's a lot of Class B girls in one place."

So that's why Kikyou's mental energy was drained much faster than usual yesterday.

*"Well, not really. Some of the girls tend to go somewhere as soon as new groups meet up and a ragtag group would remain. In the end, it was me, Kei-chan, Chiyo-chan, and Kayoko-chan who wound up hanging out until evening."*

"And Ishikura ended up getting close to Karuizawa because of that."



*"Same with me and Chiyo-chan. I didn't really have the best impression of Kei-chan before, but she turned out to be an okay girl. Hanging out with her is fun and it made sense why she commands respect to the girls in class."*

It seems like Karuizawa is slowly shifting her image into something more convenient and easier to work with in the future.

"I see. As long as you guys get along, I guess."

*"You're close with Kei-chan yourself. I'm sure she'll find the time to tell you and Hirata-kun about it,"* sighed Matsushita.

"I'm sure it'd be a long story."

*"Things can be very volatile for high school girls, you know? A lot of things might change in such a short period of time. I'm sure someone like you, who prefers to live a slow life, could hardly relate."*

"You're right, but I'm satisfied with my desired slow life."

*"Fufun~, that's so you. Alright, I'll keep track of everything on my end. Good luck with whatever you're going to do, Ayanokouji-kun."*

"Thanks."

And with that, I ended my call with Matsushita. I didn't tell her anything specific, but I'm glad she cooperated.

I initially assumed that no one would be inside the Dragon Group's room, but my expectations were dashed by someone's presence...

"It seems like someone has claimed the place first..." I muttered out loud.

Ichinose Honami's sleeping figure drew me in like a moth to a flame. She was comfortably taking a nap on the floor.

I would be lying if I say that I felt completely calm as I approached her. My eyes wandered around her body-- her pretty face that I never got used to, the glistening white skin of her thighs, the protruding shape of her chest, along with her extremely feminine figure...

Any normal guy would be filled with unnecessary thoughts right now, and I wasn't arrogant enough to say that I'm an exception.

It's Ichinose Honami. *No one* can be an exception.

Her current position is extremely problematic. If I try to find the right angle, I can certainly take a peek at what's beyond what I can see right now. The same would happen with anyone who enters the room later on.

For now, I have to repress my adolescent hormones to keep myself in check. Ichinose is a close friend of mine. I don't wanna be branded as a pervert, especially in this situation when she's on the other side. I may be a growing boy with desires, but I still have the brain to think clearly.



"Mm... Mn..."

Ichinose's body shook lightly as I drew nearer. She muttered something unintelligible but it didn't seem like I woke her up.

This is quite bad. Should Ichinose move in the wrong direction, she would expose things that mustn't be exposed.

I saw her phone lying beside her sleeping figure. As her enemy, this should be the perfect time to scout out some information. However, there wasn't a need for me to do anything-- not anymore.

*"I'm not doing anything bad. There's nothing to feel guilty about,"* I thought to myself.

I stopped a few inches next to Ichinose. I sat to her south with my back facing her body. That should be enough for now.

10 minutes passed and some cute-sounding music played throughout the room. I turned around and saw that it came from Ichinose's phone.

"Mmm..." Ichinose's eyes were still closed as she grabbed her phone to stop the music. Apparently, that was her alarm.

Ichinose looked at me while blinking a bunch of times. She glanced at the door, then at the place where she slept, and then to the place where I sat. After cocking her head in thought, Ichinose smiled warmly before greeting me.

"Yawn... It's good to see you, Ayanokouji-kun. Did my alarm startle you?" Her sweet, slightly softer voice rang inside my ears.

"Oh, no. It seems like you slept well."

Ichinose stood up and sat against the wall. She patted the space on the right, inviting me to sit beside her.

"Ahaha, sorry about that. I just passed out and slept like a log. You're pretty early, though. Don't we have twenty minutes before the group discussion?"

"I came here ten minutes ago, but I think I should be the one asking you that question," I replied, taking my seat on the floor.

"Ahh, I got here about an hour ago, I think. I just wanted some peace and quiet. Since my friends keep coming in and out of my room, it's kinda noisy."

Ichinose leaned her head against her knees as she turned to me. A charming smile appeared on her face.

"You're the same, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, as per usual." I relaxed my back against the wall while looking up slightly.

"It's always been like this... for the two of us," Ichinose muttered with a sigh.

For the two of us, huh?

That's true. I was always approached by a lot of my classmates, but because of my upbringing, I'm not too used to people casually



showering me with friendly attention. That said, even a social elite like Ichinose gets tired of interacting with her friends. No one is immune to that feeling.

Even at school, the two of us often wound up together whenever we wanted to spend some time alone. One coincidence after another led to us becoming closer friends.

Silence conquered the room.

Ichinose and I spent a lot of time together-- around the railings by the boulevard, in some obscure shop at Keyaki Mall, at the special building, the unused rooms on the main building's third floor-- just the two of us. The atmosphere was always like this. We didn't talk much because we were tired of talking. We just wanted to rest and recover our energy.

"By the way, Ayanokouji-kun..." Ichinose finally broke the silence after a short while.

"What's up?"

"Do you remember what happened back on the island? You know, when we had that conversation about confessions and stuff?"

"When you told me about Shiranami?"

"Yes, and when you told me about Inogashira-san. Yes, yes, that time," Ichinose nodded rapidly.

"What about it?"

Ichinose faced me with a passionate look on her face.

"When you asked me if anyone has ever confessed to me, I answered in a panic and accidentally told you a lie." I found her guilty expression to be very cute. She really felt bad about that, huh?

"A lie?"

"Y-Yeah..." Ichinose lightly scratched her cheek with a finger. "After remembering some stuff, I think three boys confessed to me before... Those were back in middle school. Well, four if I count that one time in elementary school..."

"And five if you include Shiranami's confession." I continued her words.

"I think so...?"

"I see... So that's it? Well, even if you didn't tell me the truth now, it's not like it matters much. I won't really feel bad if you wanted to keep that information to yourself, you know?" I shrugged.

"But... you're a close friend of mine. I really felt like I needed to tell you the truth."

*You're too honest-- honest to a fault.*

"Well... You've done what you needed to do now, so stop making that awkward face."

Ichinose reflexively touched her cheeks with a confused look. She



stared at me before letting out a chuckle.

"You really don't smile, huh?"

In this friendly conversation, a smile would've been perfectly natural. It was certainly strange for me to not do so. But even though she says that, Ichinose knew me well enough to know that I don't dislike our little chat.

"I'm smiling on the inside."

"It's not bad to show it on the outside too, you know?"

We started bantering for a while before finally talking about some other stuff.

"Rising to Class A, huh? I guess it's only a matter of time for your class."

"Who knows?"

I remember that time when she, the leader of Class C, asked me about these matters for the first time.

*"You're Class B's leader, so I'll assume that you want to reach Class A."*

*"Of course, I do. The benefits are too good."*

*"Yes. I've asked the same thing to most of my classmates. We're all going to work our hardest to do the same. '99% college and job placement', huh? After that whole spiel with class points and class rankings, I can't bring myself to fully trust the school's system anymore. Surely, there's a catch."*

*It's obvious that limitations were etched into that sweet promise. Let's say that a student who graduated from Class A wanted to be a professional baseball player. How would the school go about doing that if he doesn't know anything about the sport?*

*In this day and age, becoming a professional is no joke, and for athletes, one shouldn't just be a professional to have a consistent career. They must reach and stay at the top of the rankings, too. The statistics are very unclear despite their surface-level clarity.*

*"But this school has a lot of influence, though. You can certainly make a career with the help of that influence."*

*"Oh, yes, I know that. I also wanted to graduate in Class A. I have my own dream-- a dream that I want to make real," she answered.*

Ichinose chuckled. Both of us were probably reminiscing about the same thing.

"It hasn't even been that long, but I'm already feeling nostalgic," she said. "I miss hanging out at that place. The view of the sea felt really nice. Let's go there again some time."

"Sure," I replied.

After a brief moment of silence, Ichinose smiled bitterly and spoke out.

"Only one of us can win at the very end, huh?"



"It's the fate of being in different classes. Even if we don't consider ourselves as enemies, we're still rivals at the end of the day."

"Yes, I can understand that..." Ichinose submitted her back to the wall and sighed.

I was about to mimic her relaxed posture, but my phone suddenly vibrated.

(19:53) *[She figured it out.]*

(19:53) *[She sent the names to us already.]*

After seeing the message, I tapped the name of another person on my phone and faced Ichinose.

"Ichinose--"

This exam will finally meet its end... and so will other things.

#### *Author's Notes:*

*Kiyotaka sat where he did because he wanted to cover Honami's nearly-exposed body parts from being seen by anyone who enters the room.*

*Honami glanced at the door, then to where she slept, and then to Kiyotaka's seat because she immediately realized what he was trying to do.*

*The two of them both knew what the other was thinking and decided to not mention anything.*



## Vol. 4: Chapter 11.2 - The Mind of an Elite

Final Day, 7:05 PM.

After getting separated from my groupmates, a little over five hours ago, I immediately entered the room that I was assigned to.

The first thing I did was rest for a couple of hours. Despite my eagerness to work as soon as I got inside, my body gave in to exhaustion.

Honestly, if I knew that my efforts for an all-nighter will amount to nothing, I would've slept the third night off. Running around the ship to investigate during the rest day already put a toll on my body. It's especially tough given how hard it was for me to conduct a quick yet proper interview.

No one was inside, but I assume Mori-san and the others came and left when I was asleep.

Anyway, I got to work the moment I woke up. I cast aside the heap of notes containing information on possible VIPs. While I did a lot of it, most of the specific details were obtained thanks to Hirata-kun and Kushida-san's efforts.

However, after the fifth meeting, I figured that all of those might've been unnecessary.

This time, I may have just realized the last-- No... the *only* clue that was needed to crack the code. In other words, our previous efforts may have amounted to nothing. But if this last piece hit the mark... I win.

I sat at the desk, taking my phone along with a pen and paper. I scanned my memory and remembered how my list evolved these past three days.

Firstly, I separated everyone's names accordingly for the sole reason of sorting convenience. I then marked the names of the VIPs that I knew. (*See Figure 4.1*)

In our class, Class B, the three VIPs are Karuizawa Kei, Minami Setsuya, and Kushida Kikyuu. And thanks to Kouenji-kun's reckless yet fruitful endeavor, we managed to get Minamikata-san's name. Her being the VIP was already confirmed by our allies, Class C.

### **Figure 4.1**

On the second day, while the groups were still ordered according to their briefing time, I decided to remove the class separation (on the columns), so I tallied their names in alphabetical order



(Gojūon). (See Figure 4.2)

All of it was for the sake of convenience, and I didn't really think much of it... That's because all this time, everyone-- every single one of us thought that the VIP was decided by a *certain qualification with respect to the briefing time*. That conclusion was universal for all of us first-years. The elaborate briefing time indicated the ordering and that argument was strengthened by the Dragon Group, a group where all class representatives are pitted against each other, coming in last. And of course, the emails that decided our roles were worded strangely, indicating that the VIP assignment wasn't done at random-- that there was a qualification to become the VIP.

We were all working under those premises, using the "*clues*" that the school had given us. And we slaved away at figuring out what that qualification is. Even the most ridiculous deductions about a student's personality traits were accepted as a possible answer as long as it leads us closer to the truth.

### Figure 4.2

During the rest day, while I was trying to figure out that certain qualification, I created a duplicate list that grouped the same class together with respect to their briefing time. I didn't really mind whatever changed since all I wanted was to improve my sorting.

Now, the first three groups were the ones with the three VIPs from Class B. Next to them were the Monkey Group, whom we already knew about, and the Cow Group whose VIP identity was narrowed down to us by Ryuen-kun. (See Figure 4.3)

Again, this list alteration was done only for the sake of my own convenience. At that point, we haven't even gotten a clue as to which classes the other VIPs belonged to. My progress was steady but I thought I was going to fail again.

### Figure 4.3

Now... Just past 7 o'clock in the evening, and I think I can finally see what I had been missing-- what *everyone* had been missing. It was all thanks to the conversation our group had after Ryuen-kun approached us.

The school was distracting us the whole time.

"I'll alter the list for a bit, with the same format as yesterday, but..."

My chest suddenly tightened. This feeling of finding what I've been looking for...

The answer is within my reach. I just have to do things right.

"It's the same classification, but this time, I'll..."

The reason for my initial ordering was still with respect to the briefing time, so the Dragon Group came after the first two groups from Class B.



Now then. While the Rabbit Group's position stayed the same, I decided to switch Minami-kun's group with Kushida-san's group... That's when things became clear. (*See Figure 4.4*)

#### **Figure 4.4**

"Goodness... This is..."

Now, the reason why I put the Dragon Group right next to the Rabbit Group wasn't too complicated. In fact, it was *very* simple. I thought back to the name of this special exam-- the "*Zodiac Test*". The Rabbit came before the Dragon, and the Horse came after them.

I used the *Zodiac Order* and it made a lot of sense. The only problem was the fact that I didn't think about it earlier.

"So... If I remove the separation by class entirely and arrange them purely by Zodiac Order..."

#### **Figure 4.5**

"They all lined up..."

I knew it... Karuizawa-san is the fourth member of the real fourth Zodiac group and Kushida-san is the fifth member of the real fifth Zodiac Group. Those factors made them VIPs. This pattern was properly applied to both Minami-kun and Minamikata-san's groups, as well.

There was no "*qualification*"-- or at least, not in the context that the school made us believe. The last piece-- They were the students' surnames this whole time.

I marked the VIPs and completed the final list.

#### **Figure 4.6**

*This was the code...*

There weren't any qualifications needed... nor was the briefing order relevant.

It was so simple. It was so easy. Even an elementary student would've figured this out... But given how this was all laid out to us right from the start, it became borderline impossible.

Unless they kept a list of all the members of each group and marked the VIPs as I did, there wouldn't be any way for them to even start finding the pattern.

We were all hung up on the initial "*clues*".

The purposely inefficient briefing method and the grouping order in which they were conducted were done to distract us from the original Zodiac Order. The wording on the school's emails implying some sort of qualification to become a VIP was done to distract us from looking at our names as a clue. It was literally a pattern-- a visual pattern.

The clues were nothing but a farce. All of them were done to make us look away from this childish and basic answer.

It was so simple, almost as if we were being treated like ignorant



kids.

I could only scoff at myself. We were all so thoroughly done in... by the school.

*"Since everyone who's trying to figure out the pattern is stuck on the same rut, then the school must've been pretty successful with the exam."*

*"Just don't overthink things too much. They've given us instructions to finish the exam, right? Maybe you should come back to that. It might help."*

*"If the pattern isn't showing itself, maybe you need to look at it from another perspective."*

*"You just have to use your eyes."*

*"Trying to find the pattern means you're going up against the school itself. If you think about it from that angle, maybe the answer would get clearer."*

Ayanokouji-kun's words echoed in my ears.

I tried to remember the core purpose of this exam. We were required to exercise prudence since the school was testing our *"thinking"*.

"Not only did he figure it out before anyone else... He also indirectly gave me all clues that I need..." I muttered under my breath.

It's extremely frustrating.

Ayanokouji-kun already warned me about the pitfall of this exam. *"Don't overthink"*. If I didn't take the clues too seriously, I could've figured it out earlier. The same goes for everyone. We all fell prey to the school's scheme.

"It's time for things to end now."

I carefully selected representatives from each group. They will be the ones who'll submit the answers and take the private points. Of course, they will divide the prize money with their group mates.

The last group discussion was near. As I walked out of my room, I thought about the person called Ayanokouji Kiyotaka...

"He's done something else other than this, hasn't he...?"



## Vol. 4: Chapter 11.3 - Showdown

"Ichinose--"

Amidst the serenity of the atmosphere, I suddenly called out to the relaxed Ichinose.

"Eh-?!" Startled by my voice, she could only respond with a yelp.

"I just wanted to ask if Horikita had sent you anything yet. It's almost time for the last discussion."

"Ahh, mn..." Ichinose grabbed her phone and checked. "No, not yet."

"I see..." She must be busy presenting her explanations.

"Do you still believe she can figure out the pattern?" Ichinose tilted her head curiously.

"I would like to. She's our only winning chance, after all," I replied before turning to Ichinose. "That said, it would also result in the collapse of Class C's entire plan."

"Ahaha, that's true. But you see, if the ruin of our plan was the inevitable result, I'd rather have Horikita-san win than our other rivals." Ichinose became ready for that the moment Horikita said she'd figure out the pattern during the fifth group discussion.

Just as she finished those words, Ichinose's phone vibrated once again.

"Oh-! It's here! Horikita-san really sent me the names! " Ichinose excitedly showed me the message. "She really figured it out...!"

Surely, she felt conflicted. They'd have no chance to attack and gain points from Class A's VIPs anymore. However, because of our deal, they'd gain 100 class points by submitting two of Class D's VIPs.

"Ah, but we can't really submit any of them just yet. Horikita-san wants to negotiate for the remaining VIPs of Class B and C. She'll be here shortly."

Of course, they can't submit their answers recklessly. They never know what Ryuen and Katsuragi might do once they find out.

"That's ideal. Protect yourselves before letting the enemies know you've attacked them."

"Mn," she nodded.

Despite her initial surprise, Ichinose immediately knew what to do. As soon as Horikita sent her the names, she contacted her friends who belonged in those groups. And because of that, her



attention was fully drawn to her phone at the moment.

It was about seven minutes before the group discussion. The door to the Dragon Group's room opened wide and Horikita came along with Kikyō and Hirata in tow.

"Oh, Honami-chan and Kiyotaka-kun~! Hey there!" waved Kikyō.

"Kikyō-chan, hey! Hirata-kun and Horikita-san, too." Ichinose waved back with a bright grin.

"You're here." Horikita narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. "Ah, that's right. I've figured it out, Ayanokouji-kun-- the pattern, that is."

Yes, I knew you would.

"Horikita-san's amazing! She really did it!" Kikyō celebrated innocently.

Hirata smilingly nodded without a word.

"Good job, Horikita," I said. "Did you contact our classmates from their respective groups?"

"Yes, I did. They're currently analyzing my explanation as to why there's no risk in following my answers," she replied.

"As expected, you work very efficiently."

"I appreciate your words." Horikita nodded before turning to Ichinose. "Ichinose-san, please contact your classmates from these following groups. I've already informed the representatives from groups containing Class C's VIPs. They're willing to cooperate once we give the signal."

They were finally on the topic of deliberately triggering Outcome #4 on the last four groups belonging to our respective classes. Minami and Kikyō's names will be revealed to Ichinose and her group. In turn, the names of Class C's last two VIPs will be revealed to us.

However, before Horikita could press send...

*\*Bzzzt\**

Our phones suddenly vibrated three consecutive times. After the loud dinging sound was the iconically strong yet silent buzzing that was also exclusive to messages sent by the school.

I glanced at Horikita and saw her wince in doubt and surprise. After that, I finally read the notifications on my phone.

*[The test has now ended for the Horse Group. Those in the Horse Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

*[The test has now ended for the Tiger Group. Those in the Tiger Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

*[The test has now ended for the Cow Group. Those in the Cow Group*



*are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

Everyone else checked their phones as fast as possible. Around that time, Kanzaki and Tsube also arrived inside, just five minutes before the group discussion starts.

"We're here. We've already... received the notifications." Kanzaki's composed tone instantly changed after seeing Ichinose and Horikita's uneasy expressions.

"Horikita-san, Honami-chan! Don't tell me..." Tsube got their implications and donned a worried face.

"Yes... We didn't ask anyone to submit the answers yet," said Horikita.

"Which means... someone else did..." followed Ichinose.

And then, a voice from a person whose existence was comparable to that of a venomous snake could be heard by the door.

"Hey now. The group discussion hasn't even started but you're already having a conference?" Ryuen entered the room with his lackeys.

His wide smile was all they needed to see.

"Ryuen-kun..." Horikita uttered his name with a glare.

"Ohh, that's nice. I really like the face you're making right now, Suzune."

Ryuen's overwhelming presence dominated the entire room. Kikyuu and Hirata had slightly anxious expressions. They already knew the identities of all the VIPs thanks to Horikita's explanation. Minami was the Horse Group's VIP which meant that Class C students were the VIPs of the other two groups in the notification. Tsube and Kanzaki seemed to get what happened, too.

"Kukuku. So? Did you like my surprise? Your expressions are telling me that you did."

His sinister grin brought discomfort to all of them.

"Hm? It seems like everyone else is already here."

The group was finally completed when Katsuragi arrived with the rest of the Class A members.

"Oh, Katsuragi. How was my gift?" Ryuen gave him a side glance. "I'm expecting the money right after you receive them."

Matoba and the others glared at him.

"Gift?" Kanzaki muttered in confusion.

"Are you curious? Why don't you tell them, Katsuragi?"

"This is good timing. I can confirm everything right here and now." Katsuragi approached us with a confident stride. "Of the three notifications that we received, one of them was submitted by Class A."

"Is that so? That's what your cooperation with Ryuen-kun was



about?"

"Hm, there's no demerit in talking about it at this point," he replied before continuing. "Yes, that's the extent of our cooperative relationship. *Only that*," stressed Katsuragi, telling us that he didn't give Ryuen anything beyond what he deemed necessary.

"So he didn't give him the names of Class A's VIPs, after all." Hirata and Kanzaki discussed among themselves.

*"If so, how did Ryuen figure out the pattern?"* they must've thought.

"Ichinose, I would like to confirm if our answer was correct."

The girl in question glanced at Horikita before crossing her arms.

"Of course, Katsuragi-kun. As you said, we're too late in the game to be keeping secrets."

Ryuen's chuckle reverberated throughout the room. He took a seat, acting extremely relaxed and laid back as if everything went according to plan.

"Why don't you lot take your seats, too? The Dragon Group isn't finished with the exam, you know? It's time for the final discussion."

*[The sixth group discussion begins now.]*

Following the voice from the speaker, I took a seat and tried to make myself comfortable as well.

Seeing all fourteen members of the Dragon Group sit in a big circle, we finally felt like the first official discussion had begun.

"We've targeted the Cow Group," said Katsuragi. "According to Ryuen, the VIP is from Class C; namely, Kobashi Yume."

Tsube and Kanzaki's eyes twitched before narrowing.

"So Ryuen-kun really knew about them-- the VIPs, I mean," shrugged Ichinose. "Well, nothing we could do about that now. Anyway, going back to your question, the Cow Group's VIP is indeed Yume-chan. You've triggered Outcome #3, Katsuragi-kun. Congratulations."

Ichinose's response wasn't unexpected. Katsuragi lightly snorted in satisfaction.

But after that, she turned to Horikita with a meaningful look. They didn't even need to nod at each other to know what was needed to be done. With a subtle tap on their phone screens, the go signal had finally been sent to the necessary people.

"That's 50 class points for you, Katsuragi," commented Ryuen.

The other two groups were obviously submitted by Class D. If their answers trigger Outcome #3, Class D would have a net gain of 100 class points after the exam on top of the private point rewards.

"There isn't much time left before the end of this exam, but we can still seal the deal defensively, Ryuen. I don't know why you're so against it."

Everyone knew what those words implied and Katsuragi didn't



care that we could hear him.

"Are you talking about triggering Outcome #4, Katsuragi-kun?" asked Horikita.

"That much is obvious. There's no demerit in doing so, especially now that we've secured an answer. I'm sure you've planned to do it, too. It's a solid strategy."

If they succeed in doing so, then the gap between us and Class A would widen.

"Don't get me wrong, Katsuragi. I like that strategy but I also *really* hate it."

"Hate it?"

"It's a strategy that's perfect for book-smarts and orthodoxists like you. It's extremely boring and it removes the fun in this exam," replied Ryuen.

"That's irrelevant when you're trying to win." Katsuragi wasn't the least bit provoked by his words.

Given how they also planned to implement that strategy, I'm sure Horikita and Ichinose are behind Katsuragi on this one. However, having similar opinions didn't matter as long as you were enemies. Horikita's next sentence hammered the final nail in the coffin.

"Well, I don't think there's any need for you to worry about that now, Katsuragi-kun," she said.

*\*Bzzzt\**

Just by looking at their facial expressions, it was apparent that Katsuragi and his classmates immediately got a bad premonition.

*[The test has now ended for the Snake Group. Those in the Snake Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

*[The test has now ended for the Sheep Group. Those in the Sheep Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

*[The test has now ended for the Rat Group. Those in the Rat Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

*[The test has now ended for the Rooster Group. Those in the Rooster Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

*[The test has now ended for the Pig Group. Those in the Pig Group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students.]*

In conjunction with the five spontaneous buzzings, we've also received five new notifications.

"Ryuen, what's the meaning of this?" Katsuragi questioned him with a strong tone. He flashed his phone towards Ryuen, showing



him the notifications.

"Huh? What are you so confused about, Katsuragi? The answer is quite obvious," he replied.

Ryuuen didn't even look at his phone, as if he knew this would happen.

"*Did you betray Class A?*" That's probably what Katsuragi was thinking-- No. That's what he *wanted* to think. He already knew the right answer.

"..." Katsuragi's stone-cold expression showed a hint of denial. It almost seemed like he hoped for it to happen-- Ryuuen's betrayal-- rather than the other possibility. Sadly, Ryuuen could only chuckle in response. He knew what Katsuragi was thinking.

"What with that face? We're allies, right? Of course, I kept my word until the end. I didn't betray you."

Katsuragi's eyes narrowed as he turned towards Horikita.

"I see... So you've figured out the pattern, Horikita Suzune," he said.

Horikita sighed and glanced at me for a second before facing Katsuragi.

"That's right, Katsuragi-kun. I managed to figure out the pattern." She responded with a steadfast expression. "I won."

Hearing her say that filled me with a strange feeling of satisfaction.

Katsuragi glanced at Ryuuen, trying to confirm if Horikita was bluffing.

"Kukuku. Sorry, Katsuragi. It seems like Class A... have lost." They were allies, but Ryuuen didn't even look remotely concerned. In fact, his sinister smile almost condemned Katsuragi and his class's fall. "I hope you won't forget about my money just because you lost, Katsuragi."

Class A finally detached themselves from the group discussion.

Katsuragi calmly took the news and sighed in his seat. Horikita and Ryuuen delivered his death call, but he kept his cool without a hitch. His classmates accompanied him with anxious expressions.

"Katsuragi-kun... Are they serious?" asked Matoba.

"We can't really confirm anything unless the results are revealed," replied Katsuragi. "The chance of them being wrong is still there. But I advise you; don't put too much hope on that possibility. Horikita Suzune and Class B know what they are doing. They wouldn't submit their answers unless they are sure of them."

"But did they really find the pattern? All of us wracked our brains



into it, too. Even with all the clues, four names weren't enough to figure anything out," said Nishikawa.

According to Hashimoto's words, Katsuragi knew a fourth name. However, even that didn't amount to anything in the end.

Meanwhile, Horikita faced Ichinose and spoke.

"Ichinose-san, it's quite regrettable that it happened but..."

If Horikita figured out the code earlier, then they wouldn't have been too late with the Outcome #4 Strategy, and Ryuen or Katsuragi wouldn't have anyone left to target. It would've been a completely overwhelming victory for both Class B and C. We knew that all too well.

"Ahh, it's alright, Horikita-san. I don't even have the right to complain about anything. Taking part in our deal was already enough for us." Ichinose interrupted her with a smile.

Her gratitude was understandable. If it weren't for our deal, they would have been at a hundred class point deficit.

Amidst their conversation, Ryuen's clap could be heard from their part of the circle.

"You've done well, Suzune. Color me impressed."

Despite Horikita's victory, Ryuen didn't look surprised at all.

"I'm more impressed that you can smile despite having your victory snatched away from you Ryuen-kun," said Ichinose.

"It's not a big deal for me," he replied.

Everyone narrowed their eyes in doubt.

"You've done the same type of negotiation, right? Giving up the reward money for class points? I hope you're happy about evening out your losses and gains." Ryuen mockingly chuckled before continuing. "Sorry, sorry. Saying that gets me every time. *Evening out*? What a joke. You guys just got robbed of one and a half million private points. Seeing you smile impresses me more, Ichinose."

"Let me borrow your words back, then. It's not a big deal for us. Sure, private points are important, but class points are what we need in order to hold our ground. We'd gladly accept that trade, especially since it was the only option left for us. The money came from the school, anyway. Not from our own pockets." Ichinose argued back without much thinking.

Ryuen's grin stayed the same as he changed the topic.

"Alright, Class A got crushed and our three classes are satisfied. However, the question still stands. How are the Dragon Group and Dog Group still in the game?"

Horikita's eyes narrowed as soon as she heard him ask that question.



"I have no idea, and frankly, I'm not interested. Only you and Horikita-san know about the remaining VIPs. Based on everything that's happened just now, the VIPs should belong from your classes-- one for each." Ichinose answered with a shrug.

She didn't know the pattern, so she couldn't be bothered with doing anything at this point. And of course, she can't expect her own original plan to work in this group. Against people like Ryuen and Horikita, that strategy just won't fly.

In the end, we all decided to let the hour pass by.

"Well, the meeting between all fourteen of us didn't take that long, huh?" commented Hirata.

"G-Geez. The pressure was high the entire time. My heart was beating so fast," said Tsube.

The group got divided after the short conference. With the exam being almost over, the seven of us decided to hang out until the clock hit nine, as per usual.

"So the VIP in this group is either from Class B or D, huh?" said Ichinose. "Isn't that super interesting? What if the VIP is from Class B? I'd be so impressed with the VIP's acting skills!"

"If that's the case, then I hope they'd stay hidden until the end. We don't want our class points to decrease unnecessarily," replied Horikita.

Ichinose stared at her with a huge grin.

"If the VIP turned out to be Ayanokouji, then that would make a lot of sense. His expressions are unreadable, after all." Kanzaki smiled while holding his chin.

"That's true..." Kikyuu, Hirata, and Tsube agreed with him instantly.

"Seriously...?"

Despite the ongoing battle, the atmosphere between our classes was friendly. We were even playing around with the identity of the Dragon Group's VIP. Of course, Kikyuu's guard was still on maximum. If we let the truth slip out, there's no guarantee that someone won't turn traitor.

The time limit passed without a hitch and the exam was basically finished. However, things were bound to get more interesting.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 11.4 - Changes

Final Day, 9:00 PM.

When the Dragon Group separated, Horikita got up and briskly walked out of the room. I immediately went after her with Kikyou and Hirata following along in a panic.

"Horikita," I called.

She turned around with a glare to which I reply...

"I know you're wondering why the Dog Group didn't submit the answer."

Horikita stopped in her tracks. She probably planned to ask the Class B students in the Dog Group. After all, the VIP of that group is from Class D. Horikita already told them who their VIP is, but they haven't submitted their answer even until now. It wasn't part of Horikita's plan at all.

"Ayanokouji-kun... Were you the one responsible for this?" she asked.

"Yeah, I never had the chance to tell you because Ichinose and the others were there," I nodded.

"Alright. Since you're the one who planned this, I won't go out of my way to confront Yokoyama-san and the others." Horikita turned around before glancing back at me. "In return, I want to know everything that you did behind the scenes."

"Sure, how about the 9th deck? Kikyou and Hirata can come along."

The two caught up as I spoke those words.

"H-Haa... I-Is everything alright, Kiyotaka-kun, Horikita-san?" Kikyou asked while panting.

"That's fine with me, let's go." Horikita lead the way as her raven-black hair fluttered beautifully.

The four of us sat in a cafe. The bright lights illuminated the coldness of our last night on this luxurious cruise ship.

"The representative of the Dog Group was supposed to be Rino Akari-san. However, neither her nor Yokoyama-san and Makida-kun submitted an answer."

"And based on what we've heard earlier, Ayanokouji-kun was the one who made them not do so?" asked Hirata.

"That's right, I've contacted them in advance. Now that the exam



is finished, my reason should be obvious for you guys," I replied.

"This was your trump card to protect Kushida-san, right?" Horikita answered with a side-eye.

"Protect me...?" Kikyou slightly blushed with a confused expression.

"Now that I think about it, that should indeed be the case. If Rino-san submitted the answer along with the other ones, the only group that'd remain is the Dragon Group. If that happens, everyone will know that the VIP is from our class. With amazing students like Katsuragi-kun, Ichinose-san, and Ryuen-kun, it'll be hard to maintain the secrecy of your identity, Kushida-san," explained Hirata.

"I don't think Ichinose-san will try to interrogate us, but Ryuen-kun would most possibly will. And since Katsuragi-kun lost horribly, being backed to a corner might make him join Ryuen-kun's last assault on us."

"But isn't that weird, Horikita-san?" Kikyou cocked her head to the side. "Ryuen-kun already knew that the Dragon Group's VIP was one of us, right? Why didn't he try to get the name earlier...?"

Hirata and Horikita started to ponder. Kikyou's query was sound and valid. Ryuen's silence was indeed a mystery. That said, I have no intention of giving my opinion on the matter.

"Well, Ryuen-kun aside, what were the specifics of this plan, Ayanokouji-kun?" Horikita turned her attention back to me.

I created this plan knowing full well that I'd get busted in the end. All I can do now is tell them the truth.

"I made a group chat with the four of us."

I showed them the contents of my phone. Since I didn't bother deleting any of my messages or call histories, everything could be seen by the three of them.

"So you really were in contact with Matsushita-san." Horikita crossed her arms.

"She was my assurance. I knew you wouldn't contact me about your findings, so I asked her to tell me instead. As you can see from my group chat conversation with the Dog Group, we've been in contact with the Class D students along with their VIP. Should something happen that could affect the negotiations, I need to be quick in updating them. And those changes will depend on your answers," I explained.

"Is this Karuizawa-san...?" Meanwhile, Kikyou took note of a different name.

My conversation with Karuizawa was plain and simple, though.

*(19:53) [Manabe and her friends haven't done anything as of late, right?]*



(19:54) [Yes.]

(19:54) [Everything's alright.]

"I was the one responsible for resolving her matters with the Class D girls. I thought I'd check on her every once in a while."

"But Hirata-kun could do that, too, right?" Kikyuu gently pressed with a subtle change of tone.

I glanced at Hirata, pleading for any form of assistance. Kikyuu's angelic smile was a lot more terrifying when you know what's behind it.

"I'm checking on her regularly, Kushida-san. But I also think Ayanokouji-kun's involvement is necessary at this stage. He was present when they confronted each other, after all," he explained, smiling bitterly.

"I see~! Remember to take care of your girlfriend, okay? That's *your* job as her boyfriend, after all~!" Kikyuu happily preached him.

"Of course." Like the stud that he is, Hirata Yousuke took Kikyuu's words with a smile.

In the end, I explained our negotiations about triggering Outcome #1. I warned them about Class C's last-ditch attempt to find the VIP, as well. With the students of Class B and D working together to negate their plan, Sumida and the others' efforts failed to yield anything.

"Wait, wait, wait... Isn't there something weird about all this, Hirata-kun...?"

"You've noticed it, too, Kushida-san?"

Kikyuu and Hirata finally realized something as they looked at me with strained smiles.

"Kiyotaka-kun, you've been talking about negotiating with the Dog Group's Class D students, but wasn't this group chat made much earlier...? Then how did you know that the VIP was from Class D...?" mused Kikyuu.

"And although you've asked Matsushita-san for help, she didn't really give you any VIP names. So you wouldn't have known anything in the end..." added Hirata. "Unless..."

Horikita sipped her drink with utmost elegance. She then opened her mouth and spoke with a detached expression.

"Yes, your suspicions are right. Ayanokouji-kun figured out the pattern way before me."

"E-Eh..." Kikyuu forceful smile made her cheeks twitch.

Even Hirata couldn't do anything but chuckle nervously.

"You could've told me about it from the start, you know?"

"I can't afford to distract you when you barely even made it."

"That's true."

Horikita also understood the reason why I didn't bother telling



her anything. She was better off focusing on her job than worrying about my involvement.

After our short meeting, we decided to go about our separate ways. Of course, not before setting the final schedule-- the schedule to see the results.

"So we'll meet here again at 10:50?" asked Hirata.

"Yes. No matter what the final results are, I'm sure they'll be worthy of discussion." Horikita started walking away.

It was currently around 9:30 PM. We have a lot of time to spare. Horikita probably wanted to go back to her room and Hirata told us that he'd get in touch with Karuizawa.

"Do you want to go together, Kiyotaka-kun?" asked Kikyou.

"Sure, but to where?"

Kikyou and I went up to the top-most deck. The cold breeze made contact with our skins.

"Fuu~... It sure is chilly up here."

She ran up to the railings and held the steel bars.

"Look, Kiyotaka-kun, some students could be seen from here!"

I approached her with unhurried footsteps. The night was dark, but the ship was as illustrious as it can be. I can clearly see Kikyou's impeccable figure from where I'm standing.

"We're still in our uniforms, you know? You might catch a cold at this rate."

"What are you saying? I won't get sick that easily." Kikyou dismissed me with a smile.

"Well, if you say so."

The two of us silently observed the students hanging out on the fifth deck. Most of the restrictions were lifted given how this was our last night. Of course, ordering alcohol from places where they're sold is still strictly forbidden.

"Say, Kiyotaka-kun... Do you think we're going to become Class A after this exam?" Kikyou broke the silence with an innocent question.

"Most likely. Everything went well, especially with Horikita figuring out the pattern."

"Yeah... And at this point, the Dragon Group would probably trigger Outcome #2. If that happens, then we'll go up by a hundred class points passing Katsuragi-kun's class."

"Yeah," I replied with a sigh.

"After this, you'll finally stop being our class's leader, huh?"

"I've accomplished my first goal after coming to this school. Now... All I want to do is live a peaceful high school life until I graduate."

"Mhm... You said that a bunch of times already. I'm sure the



others would understand."

"Instead of worrying about what the school or our rival classes might do, I'd rather focus on being a normal student," I shrugged.

"Well, a nice high school life should be awaiting you then..." Kikyuu subtly faced me, her head looking down. "You know, Ryuuko-chan confronted me last night."

"Ryuuko, huh? What did she tell you?"

"It's about you, of course."

I see. To be honest, I kind of knew that already.

"Ryuuko-chan is a serious girl, much like Horikita-san. She's smart but also sociable. She and Ichihashi-san were like the big sisters of our group. They were both mature and cool-headed. And that Ryuuko-chan told me that she wanted to get closer to you... with a childishly adorable face," she narrated. "She was basically asking for permission, even though she didn't need to. I was the closest girl to you, after all. Everyone in the class was aware of the romantic tension between us, and even the people from other classes tend to think that we're actually dating."

"What did you tell her then?"

"I told her that nothing was going on between us-- that she can just go for it. She was sincere. Far more sincere than the loathsome people I've encountered back in middle school. There's no way I can think of anything bad about her. Like Kokoro-chan, I can feel like they'd think of me as a friend regardless of how kind or popular I am."

"Are you ready to tell them the truth about yourself, though?"

"Ahaha... To be honest, I'm still afraid. What if I'm wrong? What if they come to hate me and in turn, I'd come to hate them as well? It's funny, right? I always thought of everyone to be below me-- that I was always the better person, but I don't want to lose the friends I've made now."

"Isn't that natural, though?" I posed a question, looking straight into the moonlit, starless sky.

"Natural?"

"When a kid does something wrong, everyone tolerates them because they're just kids. They can easily grow from the mistakes they've made as long as the people around them put in the effort to correct them," I explained. "Isn't that the same as your middle school friends, then? For all we know, Ryuuko might also have an unpleasant past as someone who's extremely unlikable. However, she changed for the better after entering high school. She grew, just like the ones who turned their backs on you before."

"So you're saying that there's a shot for reconciliation between me and my previous class?" Kikyuu scoffed, looking disgusted with the



idea.

"Maybe. They were normal kids... while you were different. You had a clear goal-- you wanted to be the best and you did everything you can to do so. However, that came at a price. Your mind couldn't bear the stress, so you had to vent your ugly inner thoughts and feelings out. And of course, we all know how that ended."

"I admit that. I felt like dying every time someone does better than me or if the people I actually hated acted like we were the best of friends. It makes me want to puke every time. That's just how I abhor losing..."

"But you don't feel that way anymore, right? At least not towards Inogashira and Ryuuko."

Kikyou chuckled softly.

"I don't intend to change my way of living. I still crave for the love and attention of others, and losing still makes me feel upset..." Kikyou turned to me with a melancholic smile. "But perhaps... the kindness that I'm showing to you and my closest friends could be considered genuine."

Horikita, Karuizawa, Kikyou, and a lot of our other classmates were starting to change. In the last four months, our class had tons of opportunities to grow. Some took those opportunities and some didn't. But regardless, I'm looking forward to seeing how everything will go from here.



## Vol. 4: Chapter 12.1 - The Outcomes

It was roughly five minutes before the results are announced.

"Hey~!"

"Honami-chan! Hitomi-chan! Kanzaki-kun, too!"

Kikyou greeted our friends from Class C.

"I'm glad you could make it," said Horikita.

You could've smiled while saying that, you know?

"Oh, Karuizawa-san, hey there!"

"Hey, Ichinose-san." Karuizawa greeted her with a smile.

She stuck close to Hirata, indirectly telling everyone about her place.

This was probably the last time that our group would meet up like this. That said, three unexpected guests joined our little gathering.

"Would you look at that? It's a little afterparty. 'Care if we crash for a bit?"

"Ryuuen-kun, hey there," Ichinose greeted them normally.

"Kaneda-kun and Ibuki-san, too."

Kikyou gently waved her hand to say hello as Karuizawa chose to ignore them. Meanwhile, Hirata and Tsube smiled normally in contrast to Horikita and Kanzaki who squinted their eyes in distrust.

"Kaneda... You did us good during the island exam." Kanzaki spoke with a heavy tone.

"Ah, Kanzaki-shi. I'm glad you remember me." Kaneda nodded gracefully. He didn't even feel pressured by Kanzaki's words.

"Now, now. Kaneda-kun helped us a lot when we were on the island. And he didn't do anything to harm our class, you know? We were just careless enough to get deceived. It's our fault for letting our guard down." Ichinose candidly butted in.

I'm sure she had something to say about their provisional points getting purged, but she also knew that this wasn't the time.

Kanzaki sighed, clearing his head with her words.

"That's true." He turned his sights to the obvious mastermind. "But we won't fall for your petty tricks next time, Ryuuen."

"Is that how you welcome other people? Seems like Class C's reputation of being the friendliest class is nothing but nonsense."

For someone who talked like he was taking offense, Ryuuen didn't look offended at all.



"Ehh? Do other classes see us like that? I'm honestly flattered." Ichinose received his mockery as a compliment. Her main purpose was obviously to dodge conflict, but I'd like to think that she was also genuinely gladdened. "That said, what brings you here? I'm assuming Horikita-san didn't invite you."

"Invite? When did I need to get invited to come here? This is a great spot to spend a nice evening." Ryuuen comfortably sat at the nearest table with Ibuki and Kaneda standing beside him. "I'm not too interested in seeing your reactions to the results. All of us should, more or less, know what they'll be at this point. However, I think your thoughts on it might entertain me for a bit. That's why I'm here."

His words made me look around the place. We were in a simple open-air cafe. The clouds began to disperse and the stars started to show themselves as I felt the night grow colder. This was indeed a great place to stay around this time.

It wasn't long until the time hit 11 o'clock. When we received the notification from the school, all of us checked our phones apart from Ryuuen and his two companions.

*Rat: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Cow: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Tiger: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Rabbit: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Dragon: Outcome #1. The entire group answered correctly at the end of the test.*

*Snake: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Horse: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Sheep: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Monkey: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Rooster: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

*Dog: Outcome #1. The entire group answered correctly at the end of the test.*

*Pig: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.*

Based on those results, the increase or decrease in class and private points are as follows-- "cl" and "pr" are used to denote "class points" and "private points", respectively.

*Class A: Minus 100 cl; Plus 4 Million pr*

*Class B: Plus 100 cl; Plus 6 Million pr*

*Class C: No Change in cl; Plus 4.5 Million pr*

*Class D: No Change in cl; Plus 5 Million pr*

"Outcome #1...?" Kikyuu stared at her phone with a confused expression.

"No need to thank me, Kikyuu. I did this just for you." Ryuuen grinned at her while spreading his arms.



"Sigh... Well, it's not too unexpected. We were under the impression that you knew all of the VIPs, anyway." In contrast, Horikita's arms were crossed as she eyed Ryuen.

"Since the cat is out of the bag, I can finally tell you that Ryuen-kun did indeed contact the rest of the Dragon Group around 9:30 PM. His message was simple: *"Kushida Kikyou is the VIP"*. And since there wasn't any risk, all of us gladly took that chance. In the end, our group ended with Outcome #1," explained Ichinose.

"That would also explain your behavior earlier, Ryuen-kun," said Hirata. "Even if you knew Kushida-san was the VIP, you didn't bother questioning her during the last discussion."

"Behavior? Don't talk like you can understand me, Hirata. There's no need to sound smart just because you beat Class A." Ryuen laid back on his chair with a mocking smile.

"Aren't you just whining like a loser at this point? Getting Outcome #1 for the Dragon Group doesn't matter when it only serves to benefit our class more. If it's true that you figured out the pattern like I did, then you're foolish for playing around until the very end," argued Horikita.

"Hmm." Ryuen only smiled at Horikita before looking at Ichinose. "You still don't know anything about the pattern, right? I think you'll enjoy this, then."

He took out a folded piece of paper and flicked it to our table. Ichinose looked at the contents and chuckled lightly. The ink was still glistening, indicating that he wrote those names just a few minutes ago.

"The VIPs' identities were dependent on the members' surnames. They were selected based on their alphabetical placements on the list with respect to the official Zodiac Order." Ryuen briefly explained the pattern with a smug smirk.

"To think it was this easy..." Kanzaki glared at the list of VIPs.

"So all of those clues... were nothing but feints, huh?" said Ichinose.

"You were all treated like idiots by the school. Even Katsuragi didn't have any clue. Only Suzune lived up to my expectations." Ryuen stood up and walked away with a satisfied smile. "I'm looking forward to the second semester."

We all thought that he and the other two Class D students would be gone for good, but Ryuen stopped in his tracks and uttered one more sentence.

"No one figured it out in the end, huh?" They resumed their light steps as Ryuen continued to chuckle in glee.



Those words were a mystery to Horikita and the others. However, what mattered more to the Class C students was the piece of paper that contained the 12 VIP names.

"Ichinose-san, here's the complete list for all of the members from each group, all in the right order. I've marked the VIPs as well," said Horikita.

There wasn't any harm in revealing everything now, so Horikita didn't have a problem sharing it with them.

"Oh, man... It was this simple...? To think that the school would trick us like this. Ahaha, I feel like an idiot now." Ichinose scratched her head with a bitter smile.

"I can't believe I didn't figure this out..." Kanzaki frustratingly stared at the list.

"I don't think you should feel bad about this, Kanzaki-kun. Apart from keeping tabs on the people in the exam, we never really looked at the members' list as a clue. The school perfectly made us believe that we were looking in the right direction. Unless we overcame that border, it was practically impossible for anyone to figure out the pattern without five or six names to work with," explained Tsube.

"We all knew four names, right? But Horikita-san figured it out, regardless. Even Katsuragi-kun failed to find anything in the end. I think that's quite amazing."

Ichinose's tender voice immediately told Horikita that she was receiving an authentic compliment. However, it only served to nettle her even more.

"No..."

Horikita winced. She looked visibly dissatisfied.

"Tsube-san is right... But I don't think I did anything amazing in particular. The realization I had was nothing but a stroke of luck. It was almost a miracle..." Horikita paused for a second before she continued. "Almost as if someone put everything in place."

Katsuragi managed to strike a deal with Ryuen while keeping Class A's traitors in check. Meanwhile, Ichinose managed to strike a deal with us while planning a large-scale offensive to break a stalemate ending.

Even if she won, Horikita realized that her feats wouldn't have been possible if Ryuen didn't stir up that last conversation during the fifth group discussion-- that along with the clues I gave her earlier. Horikita managed to get a victory, but she didn't feel like her accomplishments were better than the other leaders.

Exactly five minutes after giving us the results, another message was received by the students. We checked our phones to see what it was.



*Here are the current class standings:*

*Class A: 1118*

*Class B: 1212*

*Class C: 890*

*Class D: 691*

*Any changes will be applied in the following month.*

"We won! We're going to be Class A next month!" celebrated Karuizawa.

"Yes, everyone in our class will surely be overjoyed," Hirata nodded happily.

"We did it, Hitomi-chan!" Kikyô's bright smile lifted the atmosphere.

"That's great, Kikyô-chan!" said Tsube.

"Congratulations, Horikita-san. You guys are the new Class A. It was a well-deserved victory." Ichinose commended Horikita with Kanzaki nodding in agreement.

*"Well-deserved".*

Horikita felt disturbed after hearing that word. Her triumph over the other classes didn't feel as earned as it initially did. Deep inside, Horikita stopped feeling like she really won...

Chabashira-sensei berated our class for being defects, and those who retaliated got thoroughly put in place, especially Horikita. The words of her brother, telling her that she didn't deserve to be in Class A, should still be fresh within her mind. It wasn't just for her. Those criticisms extend towards every student in her class.

Did they really deserve to be in Class A?

Horikita started to doubt that. I'm stepping down as their leader, and because she fully acknowledges my abilities, she'll become self-conscious about her own abilities.

Demurral, insecurities, and hesitations... not just about herself, but also for the class that she was about to lead. Before I go, I wanted her to see all of it-- feel all of it. Her place at the top will not be easy, and for that, Horikita must lose.

I wanted the class to win, but I wanted Horikita to lose, and that's exactly what happened. I stared at Horikita, waiting for her eyes to wander in my direction.

*Apart from a single person, everyone thought that I didn't make any moves during this exam, when in fact... I was the one behind everything. However, that doesn't really matter anymore. After all, we've overtaken Class A.*

*My Self-Test may have reached its conclusion, but I've also planted the seeds for my class's growth.*

*In the end, everything went according to plan.*



*Author's Notes:*

*This is the last chapter of Volume 4. In extension, this will also be the last chapter of Classroom of the Elite: Alter - Self-Test. Thank you for all the support you've given the book up until the very end. I hope you've enjoyed reading my work as much as I did writing it. And please continue to support Classroom of the Elite.*



## SS.21 - Nishimura Ryuuko: A Place Next to Him

I've always been looking at him. Kikyou-chan is his best friend and the people from the Ayanokouji Group are his closest friends. Of course, since he was our class leader, Ayanokouji-kun was also very close with Class C's leader, Ichinose-san, who's arguably the most popular girl in our year apart from Kikyou-chan herself.

Ugh... Now that I've mentioned all of that, it sure sounded like he's someone unreachable. But fortunately, that couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, I'm actually a good friend of his.

Ah, but don't misunderstand. Ayanokouji-kun, much like Hirata-kun and Kikyou-chan, is quite close with everyone in the class, so it's not like I'm special or anything like that.

"It's weird, isn't it? I wonder why you were assigned in Class D, initially...?"

Hearing his voice calms me down. I'm sure I'm not the only girl who shares the same opinion. It's different from Hirata-kun's gentle voice or Kikuchi-kun's mature voice.

Ah, no good, no good. He's talking to me right now. I should at least respond with the same amount of awareness.

"Hmm... I'm not saying that I'm worthy of Class A or anything, but the term *"defect"* doesn't really do well to describe a lot of us..." I mused. "For example, there's Hirata-kun and Kikyou-chan. The only *"defect"* that I could think of is that they were too kind and caring."

Chiaki's only flaw would be her lackadaisical attitude. Mii-chan was smart, so her shyness should be the problem. Not only them... Sana, Misaki-chan, Ueno-kun, or even Makida-kun. They had no obvious attitude problems and their basic specs were fairly balanced with no glaring weaknesses.

And in terms of being a model student who's too kind and caring, one might argue that those traits describe Ichinose-san, too, who was initially assigned in Class B.

Ayanokouji-kun stared at me with his seemingly all-knowing eyes.

"You're probably right. Maybe Chabashira-sensei was just exaggerating with the whole *"defect"* thing," he replied.

"Well... There's Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun who aren't the best



and most enthusiastic when it comes to studying, but that also goes for some students in the current Class D. And when it comes to me, I guess my so-called "*defect*" could be my weakness in athletics."

"I see. But that should be the case for most of the girls in our class-- though I can't really pinpoint how better the girls in other classes are. Just by looking at it from an outsider's perspective, the overall abilities are well-distributed."

In the grand scheme of things, I can see why they'd describe our class as inferior. Even if there were a lot of powerhouses in our class, the others were still better on paper. There were just too many students in our class who are weak in academics, athletics, or even both.

And worst of all, our class also possessed the largest number of immature students. Though of course, that's just my personal observation.

"Maybe it's temperament...?" I said.

"Well, if it's temperament alone, Horikita shouldn't be assigned in Class D. Her temperament is bad but effective at times. And people like you, Hirata, Kikyou, and Matsushita should be in Class A in terms of temperament," replied Ayanokouji-kun.

Ah-- I got complimented.

"W-Well, me aside, I do think that what you're saying is true... Horikita-san appeared arrogant during the early months and she's still quite stern in terms of nature, but that doesn't mean she's worse than those who are just straight out jerks."

And of course, the other three that he mentioned have extremely flexible temperaments.

And why would this school take that into account in the first place? I feel stupid for suggesting that answer now.

"Frankly speaking, each class should have the potential to become Class A, or the system itself would be meaningless. The established stigma against the lower classes must've been a huge factor in their downfall. After all, it was easy to get overwhelmed when you're in Class D or C, especially if the opponents have a considerable amount of lead in class points."

"A huge difference in morale, huh? I see... That makes a lot of sense. I mean we have the biggest anomaly in our class, which is you, so our class's morale is through the roof right now," I chuckled.

Ayanokouji-kun did nothing but stare back at me.

"You're prone to underestimating yourself, but you're obviously an excellent student. You're always saying that your poor social skills are the reason for your assignment in Class D, but the more I spend time with you..."

He interrupted me with a slightly teasing tone.



"You think they put me in Class D to compensate for the others?"

I could only meekly nod. It's like he could read the deepest parts of my mind.

"Hmm... I don't think the school knows *that* much. There's still a chance that everything's just a coincidence."

"Hihi, that's true."

The two of us were currently on the main deck's starboard hallway outside of the cabins. It's still more than an hour before the final class discussion, so I should enjoy this moment thoroughly. After all, this is one of the rare times where I could hang out with Ayanokouji-kun by myself.

"How are things in your group, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Horikita and the others are doing a great job. There's nothing to worry about. How about you?"

"Oh, we're just tackling the exam normally. The VIP doesn't belong in the class, so we're keeping an eye out for any possible clues." I turned my attention back to his group. "That said, you're taking a step back for this special exam, right? Given how strong the opponents are, I'm sure you'd lend your team a helping hand once they find themselves in a pinch."

"I won't. That's my agreement with Horikita."

For some reason, I wasn't too surprised by his reckless answer. Ayanokouji-kun seemed piqued by my underwhelming reaction, too.

"What brought on this agreement?" I asked.

"There's a high chance that Class B will win in this exam. Once that happens, I want the three of them, especially Horikita, to get all the glory."

"Why?" I tried to sound composed, but a tiny creak in my voice made my efforts useless.

"I'll be stepping down as Class B's leader," Ayanokouji-kun spoke calmly.

Hearing his answer, I turned to look at the dark horizon and the starless night sky.

"I'm tired of being the leader, so I decided to step down once we reach Class A. I've planned this a long time ago... Horikita, Hirata, and Kikyuu already know about this and they agreed with my decision." Ayanokouji-kun looked at me once again. "Do you think the class would react positively?"

While he didn't look worried or anxious, it still made me happy--that Ayanokouji-kun asked me about this. I'm sure he'd already consulted Kikyuu-chan about this matter, but that doesn't make the current moment between us any less special for me.

The best I could do was answer him with a warm smile.



"Yes, I think they would. I've known our class for more than four months now. We wouldn't have stood a chance if you didn't reveal the truth about the S-System back in April. And now, we're on the verge of being Class A. If you decide to stop being our leader, none of us would have the right to complain."

Ayanokouji-kun's demeanor didn't change, I thought I could faintly see a tiny arc form from his lips.

"Ah--"

He turned his head forward before I could confirm anything, though.

"Thanks, Nishimura."

"Ryuuko's fine."

"Huh?"

"I said Ryuuko's fine. We've been friends since the start of school, you know? It shouldn't be weird... as long as you're fine with it."

My facial expression should be perfectly fine, but I'm sure my cheeks and ears were as red as an apple right now. Thank god the sun is down.

Gosh, I didn't expect this to be so embarrassing... I'd seriously die of shame if he says no...

"Well, I didn't really have a problem with it. I was just surprised," he said. "Then, if you'd like, you could call me by my first name, as well."

"Mn," I nodded. "I'm glad we've become closer, Kiyotaka-kun."

"Same here, Ryuuko."

"Let's hang out lots during the summer, okay?"

"Sure, I'm looking forward to it."

The only thing I'm good at is studying and taking care of my friends. I thought I'd always be fine as long as I do my best on that front... But with *this*, I'd seriously need to work harder. My rivals are very strong, after all.

*Author's Notes:*

*Class B (Kiyotaka's Class), Nishimura Ryuuko.*

*- Nishimura Ryuuko tentative illust. by 8103x (on Twitter).*

*- 8103x-sensei or やとみ-sensei is the illustrator for the light novel series: "Osananajimi kara no Renai Soudan. Aite wa Oreppoi kedo Chigaurashii" and I will use the Main Heroine, Hinagata Shiori's appearance as a stand-in for Ryuuko's tentative appearance.*



# CotE: Alter Omake - Self-Test Edition

## I. Volume 1 - Kushida Kikyou: An Interesting Fellow

Calm down...

I need to calm down...

I'll think of ways to eliminate her, but that's not the issue right now.

This blond guy keeps on blabbering instead of letting the old lady take the priority seat. The office lady is useless, too. This is honestly just frustrating to watch...

I tried to butt in, but...

"Um, excuse me. I'm sorry that I didn't notice you earlier. Please take my seat instead."

A boy wearing the same school uniform suddenly gave up his seat.

"Oh, is that so, young man? Thank you very much!" The old lady replied with a relieved smile.

Was it to show off? Was he getting annoyed by the commotion, as well? Or was he genuinely kind?

Whatever the answer was, I didn't mind making contact with him.

"Good job on that one. Have you been a step behind, I'd be the one to speak for the poor old lady's sake, you know?" I said with a smile.

"Well, it was my fault for being absent-minded in the first place. I really wouldn't have noticed the old lady if it wasn't for that commotion. You were already standing, right? If I did notice, I might have offered you my seat, too."

*"Huh? What's with this guy? We just met and he's already hitting on me?"* That's what I would've thought if it weren't for his veritable poker face and dead tone.

"Wow. If it wasn't for your monotone way of speaking, I would've immediately thought you were hitting on me," I chuckled.

Was he the type of guy who'd get flustered by something cute? Would he panic if I put him on the spot?

"I wasn't planning on doing so. I'm sorry if that's how I came off. It only felt natural to me, as a guy, to offer my seat to a girl," he replied.

I can't understand this person at all... What's with these horrible replies...? Is he reading off a badly written script or something?



I could immediately tell that he wasn't the social type. However, his calm demeanor doesn't match up. Those responses could only be brought on by being a try-hard or by panic, but this guy doesn't exude any of them at all.

That said, if he thinks his replies are normal, then he'd really need to work on his social skills. It's like he's trying too hard to sound gentlemanly or something. It's kinda gross.

"Hehe, I see. I'm Kushida Kikyou, by the way. I'm in Class D starting this year. How about you?"

Since we're already here, we might as well go all-in with befriending him.

"I'm Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, also in Class D."

Fate wanted to be funny, I guess. But I guess this wasn't so bad.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-- frowzy, monotonous, and bad at small conversations. Those things became apparent during our little exchange. Now that I look at him closely, he was quite the handsome boy. Those features are wasted on his robotic expressions, though.

As far as first impressions go, Ayanokouji-kun was gloomy and ordinary-- the kind of guy that I absolutely despised.

At that time, I still didn't know that he'd be an important person in my life.

## **II. Volume 1: Wang Mei-yu - An Extraordinary Fellow**

I was both nervous and glad that I managed to enroll in this school. I'm sure I'd miss my parents and old friends, but I'm also looking forward to my next three years here. I'm a high school student now, so I should do my best to meet new people. I wonder how if I can make friends with anyone nice...?

April 5th, 7:40 AM.

I'm so happy that I managed to make friends with a kind girl! Her name is Kushida Kikyou-chan, and because the two of us got to talk, more opportunities opened up for me, and I became friends with more girls!

That said, I'm still too shy to talk to any guys... Kushida-san said that she's already friends with one of our male classmates, and I thought it was really amazing.

Ayano... Ayanokouji...-kun...? I think that was his name.

I saw him enter the classroom with Kushida-san so I think I know what he looks like.

Hmm... Ah, there he is.



It doesn't seem like planning to talk with anyone. I moved my gaze to the people he was staring at. On the front, a very good-looking guy was happily talking with a lot of our classmates. Near them were the girls who looked they were popular during their middle school days.

Uwahn... Just thinking about trying to befriend them already makes me feel like there are butterflies fluttering about inside my stomach... But I need to do my best.

"Wang-san, come over here! Nishimura-san and the others would like to meet you," Kushida-san called for me.

"Eh-? A-Ah, yes-!"

April 5th, 8:00 AM.

"Ahem. Good morning to you, students. I'm the instructor for Class D. My name is Chabashira Sae."

Chabashira-sensei got to the classroom as soon as the bell rang. She explained lots of stuff to us like the S-System and our monthly allowance. Everyone was celebrating until...

"Sensei, may I ask you a few questions?"

Kushida-san's friend, Ayanokouji-kun, raised his hand to call Chabashira-sensei's attention.

He questioned her about the specifics of the S-System to which she adamantly declines, saying that saying anything else would be out of line. To be honest, I also thought that everything was too good to be true, but everyone was so happy that I didn't even raise any suspicions.

"Then... can I buy that explanation from you?"

Every one of us gasped in shock. Who would think of doing such a thing at this moment? Ayanokouji-kun pushed on and tried to negotiate, but their conversation got more and more abnormal.

In the end, he managed to convince everyone in the class to take a mysterious gamble by putting his own points in the line... And that's when Chabashira-sensei explained all the hidden details to us. The entirety of Class D tried to digest all the information she relayed.

"This system tells us that our solidarity as a class will be the most important thing in the next three years. I hope we can work together as one team in all of the trials to come."

We were instructed to head towards the gymnasium after the second bell rang. Every single one of us tried our best to act normal as to not waste Ayanokouji-kun's efforts. When I stood up to walk with my friends, what transpired just minutes earlier was still fresh in my mind.

Ayanokouji-kun's unperturbed expression as he confronted



Chabashira-sensei looked very cool. Just by witnessing that, I'm sure all of us thought about how smart he is... Before I knew it, I found myself staring at Ayanokouji-kun. My heart was beating faster than usual and my face felt a bit hot.

That was probably the time I realized I was crushing on him.

### III. Volume 2: Sakura Airi - Colliding Feelings

Haruka-chan and I entered my room, putting our things to the side.

"Alright... I wanted to tell you something, and you also wanted to tell me something, right?"

"Yes... It's pretty important, so I also want you to hear me out." Her face was nervous, and I found it cute. I was usually the one in her position, so moments like this one felt really endearing for me. "But before that, Airi... Can I make a guess about what you want to say?"

"Oh, uhm, of course..."

"I see... It would be embarrassing if I'm wrong but... this is about Kiyopon, isn't it?"

"Yes... And if my guess is right, yours is also about him."

Haruka-chan's eyes widened in shock. It seems like I was right. I could only smile warmly at her dumbfounded face.

"It seems like both of us are open books," I said.

"Yeah... Seems like it..." Haruka-chan chuckled bitterly.

"N-Now I'm getting kind of embarrassed... Was it that obvious...?"

"Well, yeah... But I don't think Kiyopon has noticed anything yet. Miyacchi might've gotten a clue, but Kencchin is also a blockhead, so I think you're in the clear."

I sighed inwardly. I removed my glasses and lightly pinched the side of my hair.

"Y-You see... I think I like Kiyotaka-kun..."

"Mn..." she nodded, our faces getting red.

"Haruka-chan... You like Kiyotaka-kun, too, right?"

"Yes, I do like Kiyopon."

I don't know why, but hearing Haruka-chan confess her feelings with such an expression made me smile on reflex.

"That's a relief..."

"Eh?"

"You've told me about your past, Haruka-chan. I wouldn't want you to give up just because your friend likes the same person."

I don't want you to regret things again.

"Airi..."



"Of course, I have no intention of backing away as well. So from now on, we're going to be rivals in love," I declared with a smile.

"Airi, I..."

"Please don't have that guilty look on your face. Since you're the one feeling this way, that means you developed your feelings for him after noticing mine, right?"

"Mn..."

"Well, it doesn't seem like you've done anything sneaky to gain an advantage..." I playfully narrowed my eyes. "Or have you?"

"No, no, no, I didn't, I swear! It's just that... I always felt like I should've just kept these feelings inside. That's what I wanted to do at first but..."

"Haruka-chan, it's alright... Kiyotaka-kun is too amazing of a person, after all. I don't really blame you."

"Airi..." Haruka-chan looked like she was just about ready to hug me and cry.

"And it's not like we're the only ones feeling this way, right?"

Lots of girls have a crush on Kiyotaka-kun just in our class alone.

"Ah... you're right."

We were very close friends-- Haruka-chan and I. To be honest, I wouldn't know what might've happened to me if I didn't meet her and the other early on.

I'm sure... I'd stay meek and shy, not talking to anyone, not connecting with anyone... Having Haruka-chan and my friends we're nothing short of a miracle. Because of them, I grew. Well, I hope I did. I'm still the same soft-spoken girl from before, but I've become much more comfortable around them.

"Airiii!"

Haruka-chan hugged me tightly in a reckless manner. Good thing I removed my glasses.

"You know, Airi, if you could act this decisively and confidently outside, I'm sure people will pay attention to you. And you're so cute, so I'm sure you'll become just as popular as any other girl in our year."

So she says. Well, I spoke my mind without hesitation, but that's because these were serious matters regarding our friendship and love. To be honest, even I didn't notice it until now. I can feel myself getting a bit embarrassed.

"I-I'd like to take things slowly... The idea of being popular in school-- that thought still scares me a bit."

I would usually feel down and say something self-deprecating, but after seeing the fruits of my labor during my modeling days, it seems like my *other self* has the potential to become quite popular. Even I was aware of that.



And of course, Haruka-chan has been preaching that thought almost every day. There's no way I can deny it in front of her.

That's why I also vowed to make that other self into my real self-- or at least, I'd like to integrate them together. I'm plenty happy and satisfied with my friends now, but because of them, I'm also starting to feel like I can do better. I can't relax just because Kiyotaka-kun is doing all the work.

"Mn, mn... But I'll also try my best to win over Kiyopon... So if one of us wins in the end, I hope we could stay friends," she said.

"There's no way I'd stop being friends with you, Haruka-chan." I slowly shook my head. "But I'll also try my best... to make Kiyotaka-kun look my way."

I don't know when it all started, but Kiyotaka-kun just started making my heart beat faster. Maybe it was during the time when that bad guy attack me. He was like a knight in shining armor-- arriving right when I needed him the most.

"What if another girl wins?"

"Seeing how popular Kiyopon is, it's certainly possible. It'd be pretty sad, but at least we're together on that loss," she smirked. "I don't plan to lose, though."

Of course. We were already so close to him. We wouldn't want anyone else to steal him away. That was the selfish thought that the two of us had.

"I-I don't plan to as well-!"

"Sigh... By the way, I know something was up with the girls in our class, but I didn't expect *that*, you know? The group chat, I mean."

"You were enjoying yourself, though."

"Shut it, Airi. I won't hear anything from someone who almost blew herself up."

"T-T-That was-! I just typed on reflex and pressed send by accident!"

Haruka-chan held her head in dismay before smiling at me.

"What would I do about you...?"

#### **IV. Volume 3 - The Other Side**

3rd Day, 1:10 PM.

"Ahh~ What a shame. If only Ayanokouji-kun was here..." grumbled Azuma.

She was relaxing on the sea along with her best friend.

The two of them were a bit distanced from the main group, so they could talk about anything without worrying about getting



eavesdropped on.

"Don't you want to flirt with him, Sana-chan?" teased Ichihashi.

"Heh, you don't have to act dumb, Ruri. I know that *you're* the one who really likes him."

Ichihashi's expression stiffened.

"You think I won't notice? You're usually a very pushy and forceful person, but suddenly, you started acting like a fine lady. I knew something was happening from that point on."

"E-Eh...?"

"He's really cool, isn't he? With him around, everyone in our class can feel reassured about anything, even with that scary Class D guy as our enemy," she shrugged.

"Yeah... Ayanokouji-kun is really cool." Ichihashi blushed lightly before shaking her head. "Wait, wait, Sana-chan... I admit that that is indeed the case, but am I being too obvious?"

"No, not really. If I wasn't ticked off by your early attitude, I wouldn't have noticed at all," smirked Azuma.

"H-Hey..."

"But thanks to your sudden change, the two of us are best friends now."

"Should we thank Ayanokouji-kun for that?" Ichihashi chuckled jokingly.

"Haha~, maybe?"

Ichihashi and Azuma splashed a bit of water at each other before speaking once more.

"Are you planning to confess?" asked Azuma.

"Of course. I'm scared, though. I don't know if I can handle rejection." Ichihashi smiled bitterly.

"Well, you're plenty cute, so you're more used to being on the other side. But Ayanokouji-kun is not like the other guys."

"He's super popular, and his popularity hasn't even reached its peak yet."

"That's why you need to move while you still have the advantage. If the likes of Ichinose Honami-san from Class C develop a crush on him, it'll be all over. There were lots of cute girls in Class A, too."

"Yeah... I'm trying my best to look pretty, too, you know?"

Silence ensued and only the calm waves of the ocean along with the faint cheers of their classmates could be heard.

"Do you not like him, Sana-chan?"

"Huh? What are you saying? Of course, I do. Even I have a working pair of eyes."

"Yeah, I thought so." Ichihashi chuckled as she touched her lip.

"Do you plan on pursuing him as well?"

"You know, as a girl, the idea of pursuing a guy isn't that



appealing to me. I'd rather have the opposite. I have a crush on him, but there's too much competition."

"You're also cute, Sana-chan. I'm sure you have a chance!"

Azuma giggled after hearing Ichihashi's response.

"For how mature you've been acting recently, it still boggles me how you can sound like a naive child sometimes. You don't have to worry about me, you know? It's not like I'm desperate for a boyfriend right now."

"Are you saying that I am? I'm not about to throw myself at any guy, you know? And I know Ayanokouji-kun pretty well. I really do like him..."

"I know, I know. To be honest, I'm pretty envious. The other girls in our class are a lot closer to Ayanokouji-kun. I'm friends with him, but sometimes, I feel like I don't even know anything about him." Azuma eyed her friend with a smirk. "You're one of those girls, by the way."

"Fufun~, I don't really think so. Kushida-chan and Karuizawa-san are a lot closer to him. Even Horikita-san gets to spend more time with. I haven't even mentioned Sakura-chan and Hasebe-san," sighed Ichihashi.

Azuma tilted her head curiously after hearing Hasebe's name.

"Are things going alright with you and Hasebe-san? We talk with Sakura-chan sometimes and she doesn't look too comfortable with it, but I also don't think it's her being possessive of Sakura-chan or anything like that."

The two of them coincidentally found out about Sakura's hobby when they saw her taking photos of some scenery near the dorm. Since then, they've been talking to her about it occasionally.

"I can't really blame her. I was acting like Satsuki and Karuizawa-san at first. According to Sakura-chan, Hasebe-san wasn't particularly fond of girls like them. I would understand if she thinks we're just using Sakura-chan to get closer to Ayanokouji-kun or something."

"Well, yeah..."

"You'd like to be friends with Hasebe-san, too, right? You'll get there if you show some sincerity."

"I hope so. But if it turns out that she really just doesn't like me, then I'd give up. 'Can't really do much at that point. I'm plenty happy with being friends with you and the others~."

"Oh, look at you being all cute~."

The two splashed water at each other again before getting called out by the other girls.

"Ruri, Azuma-chan! We have some snacks over here! They're just fruits though," called Satou.



"Yes, we'll be right there!" replied Ichihashi.

## **V. Volume 4 - The Lady in the Sanctum of Books**

Rest Day, 6:00 PM.

If I remember correctly, Horikita and Hirata should be meeting with Ichinose and Kanzaki by now. Just to be safe, I should probably still ask them about the details of how it went.

Setting those matters aside, I was currently walking around the ship's 7th deck. I've been reading nothing but manga and light novels recently, so I thought I'd borrow some classic books for a change. Horikita was reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, so maybe I should read something similar.

I entered the library without much trouble. Apart from the receptionist, there were only two or three students inside. That said, I'm sure this place will be fairly crowded tomorrow since it's the last day for students to return the books they borrowed.

When I got to the mystery section, the shelves and books were arranged based on the authors' surnames.

"Let's see..."

I wasn't the type of person who'd take his time in choosing something like books. I'd usually just go in and take what I see first.

However, since I had a lot of time in my hands, I took note of everything that I might've wanted to borrow, listing the names on my phone. I would then narrow them down afterward. It was something that I did purely to waste more time. Also, this list might come in handy if I ever wanted to borrow something from the library back at the campus.

The mystery section wasn't just full of mystery books. Crime novels, noir fictions, philosophical novels-- a lot of them were here.

After some minutes, I sat down on a chair and stared at my phone.

A girl was curiously gazing at me while I was scanning the shelves.

"Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake*, Christie's *And Then There Were None*, Collin's *The Moonstone*, Doyle's *His Last Bow*, Hammett's *The Glass Key*..." There were those books among others... "...?"

I turned to look in the girl's direction and saw her walking figure step out of the library with a book in hand.

If I remember correctly, she was Class D's Shiina Hiyori.



## VI. Volume 4.5 - Sought-out Danger

August 17th, 2:30 PM.

It was summer vacation, but I was still tasked to report something... How troublesome...

"Alright, I'll keep that in mind."

After finishing my report, Chabashira-sensei permitted me to leave the faculty room. Since I was already here, I might as well ask something that's been bothering me since the island exam. Well, it wasn't really *bothering* me per se. It's more like me wanting to confirm a suspicion.

"May I ask a question, Sensei?"

"Oh...? Sure, what is it?"

"I thought the school ensured our safety. Why did something as lethal as holly berries exist on the island?" I asked.

Chabashira-sensei turned to me with an intrigued look.

"*That's* the thing that concerns you? You really are a strange one. Well, I guess it's a valid question."

I stared at Chabashira-sensei in response, waiting for her to continue.

"Let me ask you something then. Did *your* class encounter any berries like those?"

After hearing Sensei's question, I finally understood.

"I see, so that's how it is."

"Mhm," she nodded. "Elderberries were common around your camp, right? Because of their alkaloid compounds, they can cause nausea when eaten raw. Of course, your class managed to avoid that because of Ike's outdoor knowledge. A lot of similar berries could be found throughout the entire island. They can cause some minor health problems, but none of them would cause you to fall on the ground due to sickness."

"Unlike holly berries."

"Yes. Holly berries, mistletoes, Jerusalem cherries, daphnes, and some other poisonous fruits like almonds and asparagus are also cultivated there. However, you didn't find any of them, didn't you? Even if you did, you wouldn't even notice since you'd probably just brush past them."

"Now that I think about it, I think I've seen some Virginia creeper berries on forest edges."

Mountaintops, hilltops, cliffs, uncrossable terrains-- the dangerous fruits must've been planted around those areas.

"The school manages everything very carefully. The dangerous plants are almost impossible to find and harvest compared to the safe and edible ones. Ryuen managed to devise his strategy



because he's aware of that. Having holly berries in his possession shouldn't mean many things. I'm sure you've already figured it out."

"He *looked* for it, didn't he?"

I guess that makes sense. Ryuen must've had some knowledge about berries then. And even if he didn't, Ibuki was there during Ike's camping seminars. It should've been easy for her to tell him about these things.

"That's probably the case."

At the same time, the school already took Ryuen's self-harming strategy into account. If anyone got severely harmed by those dangerous plants, the school would immediately know that it was done deliberately because of how carefully they concealed everything.

Chabashira-sensei elaborated everything without breaking a sweat.

"You're awfully familiar with the island, Sensei."

"That's because I'm a teacher."

"I don't think that's the only reason, though."

"Mind your own business."

## **VII. Extra: Heroine Poll**

As for how things are going right now, every heroine still has a chance to be Kiyotaka's girlfriend. Of course, some heroines like Kikyō are way ahead of the game, while some heroines in this timeline didn't even have screen time in the LN. I'm curious to see who you guys are rooting for in this timeline.

- Kushida Kikyō
- Horikita Suzune
- Karuizawa Kei
- Sakura Airi
- Hasebe Haruka
- Satou Maya
- Matsushita Chiaki
- Ichinose Honami
- Sakayanagi Arisu
- Shiina Hiyori

Here are some of the new heroines and future heroines.

- Asahina Nazuna
- Kiryuuin Fuuka
- Wang Mei-yu
- Nishimura Ryuuko
- Azuma Sana



- Ichihashi Ruri

This is just a popularity contest to satisfy my own curiosity. As I said, the winning heroine will be decided depending on the natural course of events. And based on everything that I've envisioned, I can see **her** winning spot as Kiyotaka's girlfriend. That said, nothing is set in stone just yet.

*Author's Notes:*

*Kikyou's hate for gloomy guys is canon.*

*Airi and Haruka's conversation happened right before the trip to the deserted island.*

*Azuma Sana's tentative illust by **dnwls3010** (on Twitter).*

*Ichihashi Ruri's tentative illust by **kagachi\_SK** (on Twitter).*

*Nishimura Ryuuko's tentative illust by **8103x** (on Twitter).*

Thank you for reading Classroom of the Elite: Alter - Self-Test!



# Classroom of the Elite: Alter - Solace (Teaser)

*Next up on Classroom of the Elite: Alter...*

*"I'll leave everything to you."*

*"You'll be crushed by me, soon."*

*"You're a very strong adversary."*

*"He's still holding back, you know?"*

*"Let's do this, you bastards!"*



*"I've acknowledged your efforts."*

*"We're reading buddies."*

*"We're the same. I didn't want him to be disappointed in me."*

*"I'm sorry... I'm still lacking."*

*"Why is this happening?"*

*"People aren't equal. Society doesn't permit it."*

*"Your weakness-- I have it within my grasp."*

*"I love you."*



*"How do you know? How do you know everything?!"*

*"He's under our protection."*

*"Return, Kiyotaka. That's an order."*

*Time felt like it stopped. Right now, everyone else in this world ceased to exist... apart from the two of us.*

*"Sakayanagi..." He looked at me straight in the eyes. "Can you... destroy my class?"*

*"Fufufu~... As you wish, Ayanokouji-kun."*